Everything Including the Kitchen Sink: A Tantalizing Collection of Short Stories

Extended Edition

By Joshua Levenberg

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Forward

As someone on the Autism spectrum, it can be difficult to get my thoughts across without them coming off as awkward and incoherent. That's why I turned to writing, falling in love with the way characters and their worlds seem to connect in a convincing, immersive way; I want to create content that lasts the test of time with deep themes, creative premises, and believable characters. I hope you will enjoy the result of several years of passion and creativity.

Table of Contents

1. *The Glory of Tirigo...* pg. 5-7
2. *A Ghost Tale in Scotland...*pg. 8-20
3. *Reykjavik 2074 Winter Olympics...*pg. 21-46
4. *Houston 2036 Summer Olympics...*pg. 47-67
5. *Tale of a Judenrat...*pg. 68-87
6. *A Black WWI Veteran's Veterans Day...* pg. 88-102
7. *A Typical Day for a Dog-Like Cat...*pg. 103-116
8. *A Pastor's Holy Mission to Save Jews...* pg. 117-133
9. *Digging a Tunnel Through Shiloh...*pg. 134-175
10. *Confessions of an Unrepentant Nazi...*pg. 176-193
11. *Memorial Day in the Eyes of a Ghost...* pg. 194-203
12. *End of the Age of Neurodiversity...*pg. 204-232

13. *My Experience as a Shapeshifter…*pg. 233-263
14. *The Monster's Halloween…*pg. 264-266
15. *Noah: The Canine Hero of D-Day…*pg. 267-283
16. *Eight Years Since the Science Project…* pg. 284-289
17. *Eulogy for a Departed Furry Friend…*pg. 290-295
18. *A Mediterranean Adventure…*pg. 296-301
19. *Overcoming Fifteen Years of Trauma…* pg. 302-304
20. *A Night of Embarrassment and Fun*…pg. 305-309
21. *A New Dog, A New Status Quo*…pg. 310-314
22. *A New Home Awaits*…pg. 315-319
23. *My New Home: Here and Now*…pg. 320-322
24. *My Life at Inclusion Fusion*…pg. 323-331
25. *A Fictional Race-Conscious Letter*…pg. 332-336

The Glory of Tirigo

For centuries, humans have foolishly believed that - even if other planets had complex non-microscopic life - they weren't intelligent or conscious. However, for the past nine million years, a bustling and advanced civilization has lived on the small planet of Tirigo in the Triangulum Galaxy.

Tirigoans, as they call themselves, are indigo humanoids with a third leg in the middle and two arms below the other two. They have eyes with red sclera and an inner and outer iris. They have ears the size of their hands and mouths the size of their toes. Their motion is oily, their blood is composed of yellow sulfur, their skin is leathery, and their weight is often scarecrow-like. Tirigoan hearts have three chambers, lungs divided by four, and kidneys and livers located where the stomach and gallstones should be. Anatomy-wise, Tirigoans lack gender, genitalia, and means of reproduction.

Tirigoans speak in shrieks, clicks, and squawks as though descended from birds and write in signs deprived of consonants or accents. They typically consume rozuhan leaves and habeel juice that provide power to their cities, though animals make up their diet too. They also play unique instruments, fusions of flutes and xylophones, bass, and percussion.

Their personalities are usually benevolent and acquired to art, science, and philosophy, though they have a caste system.

The elite wear robes encrusted in the skin of lakla, fish-like creatures that live in the waterways. Soldiers carry plasma rifles and cyber shields while piloting starships and wearing armor made of wylarntium, the most robust material on the planet. Scientists invent phenomenal devices like jetpacks, teleportation pads, and healing tanks while Priests worship the almighty Gutchudor, a green, sixteen-eyed, four-breasted god considered the creator of the universe. But most Tirigoans are commoners who soil and rake for the benefit of the elite. And the lowest in the caste are slaves, who make up a quarter of all Tirigoans. Like our world, their conditions are horrible, and no law targets abuse, but at the same time, the motivation is not race but simply economics.

Society-wise, Tirigoans build grand cities with spires of udocium and villages composed of kyllus mud and qazuz straw while leaving much of the environment grounded by factories and laboratories. Temperate ecosystems are left alone while those in extreme temperatures, like lava fields or frozen lands, have been settled and exploited.

Industry ranges from metalwork and mint to food and medical equipment, and the workers are often treated no differently from chattel. The judicial system is fraudulent where prosecutors hold more sway than defendants, and the elite handpicks the jury. Altogether, The Tirigoan population not only speaks twelve tongues but is made up of thirty countries, with some being thinly veiled republics, others being monarchies or military regimes, and a few being empires vying for constant control of the other countries.

War is part of Tirigoan economic cycles. Near the end of an economic boom, countries partake in war, proclaiming glory and treasure. A common ritual found during wars is crowd entertainment through sacrificial ceremonies. Despite different politics, they all share a currency: purple embedded faseuns and oak-hued suifars.

A minority group, the Yriwgum, is oppressed and slaughtered by the Tirigoans for their culture and appearance. The Yriwgum are tribal and nature-focused, wearing tattered robes and cheap metal headdresses while appearing with creamy white skin and limbless bodies like slugs, speaking via body signals, and worshipping the Great Spirit in temperate environments.

Compared to Tirigoans' population of fourteen billion, the Yriwgum are merely forty-five million, though they stand more than the nonsentient creatures ruthlessly hunted by the majority species for sport or experiments.

In short, the inhabitants of the planet Tirigo are what we could potentially be if we had a few more million years of technology, including bioengineering our bodies.

A Ghost Tale in Scotland

Don't look back, don't stare, don't even blink. Calm yourself, calm yourself, calm…

"No, that's what Dr. MacSonagh advised me, but I'm not falling for it. I know there was a haunting in my house; I've seen it with my own two eyes."

"It's real!"

“It can’t be faked, not even if the bloody Queen rejected my story!”

This is what I told my new therapist when he asked what the reason was for me approaching him, why I ended my appointment with the old one; I couldn’t handle MacSonagh mocking my supernatural experience and claiming I was merely undergoing a bloody nervous breakdown.

Thanks to my hope that Dr. Wallace would be more considerate, I explained what happened five months ago: First, my name, then my status as a stay at home, divorced dad, then my residence in a small Scottish town called Atheol.

Oh yes, you heard that right; this isn’t a bullshit claim for pity. In most cases, the circumstances are topsy turvy: the woman washes the laundry, the woman rinses the dishes, the woman swabs and cleans and sweeps the home ‘til it’s bloody spotless, and the woman…she gains sole custody of the child after the wedding knots unravel.

Not me, old me.

I won that court case two years ago, and my bright-eyed daughter Michelle is no longer in the hands of a negligent mother who often turned a blind eye to the needs of our daughter.

Why?

Because my ex-wife Zoe's a fanatic for gambling, not childcare.

So, you know what I did?

I provided evidence of Zoe's ineptitude, dropped out of my computer technician job, and served all my time caring for my four-year-old beaut while on government welfare.

What can I say? I have a fondness for wee ones, even adopting an Akita named Kendell to grab her attention when I needed to relax or exited the house to go grocery shopping.

We stayed at an apartment for two years to earn back the income lost from Zoe's habits and absence, but it was cramped like the inside of a barn stable with leaking pipes, a low-quality telly, and days when the landlord turned off heating; not to mention, the noise

from below the floor and above the ceiling was unbearable. I had to find a home that was comfortable for all of us.

My old work friend Frank Donnell suggested a well-preserved two-story house where a little-known early 20th-century sculptor and painter named Bruce Fife lived and died. I didn't know who the fuck he was, what artworks he made, or if he had any descendants; all I knew was that it was infamous for a reason.

You see, we weren't moving into some fancy Edwardian abode that detailed great history; it was also once a whorehouse, home to the most distasteful of customers and employees, including a prostitute who murdered her clients in the bedroom. Even though I was more than a bit bloody shaken by the description, I labeled fears of ghost activity poppycock.

"Have those loonies wrapped their minds into the telly?" I once remarked when hearing about the rumors.

I watched a ghost investigation series back when I first dated Zoe, and they looked like elaborate magic tricks to me, fabricated

by celebrities paid too well. Alas, I soon learned I was wrong about ghosts. Oh, I was so, so, very wrong.

On the outside, the house looked hostile, with angry, slanted eyes, cracking ceramic, and a door that was eager to swallow all of us whole. Yet the interior on both floors looked untarnished, with freshly painted white and green plaster, spotless wooden flooring, and furniture nary a cobweb or a dust bunny. It was like someone recently renovated it.

Weeks earlier, our city council debated whether to convert the historic house into private property or not; the ayes won. Thanks to selling off my wedding ring and finding a well-paying job at a company where I fixed hacked data, I was able to purchase it at an auction, a lucky break when most potential buyers were warded off by ghost stories.

The living room looked refurbished, the kitchen intact, the bathrooms gorgeous, and the garden spruced up with the most magnificent of flora: azaleas, tulips, and rosebushes. Upstairs, the bedrooms smelt eerily of pungent lime, probably from the workers refurbishing the walls. However, the curtains and paintings of nature and people still gave a serene, untarnished image to them,

as if I was living in a one-hundred-year-old photograph. My work computer was located in the guest room where I would spend filing taxes and performing at-home work, yet I soon felt some malign presence in the air - like a voice eerily whispering, “Get out!” right into my ears.

August was uneventful, but September plugged a middle finger into my inner peace and stability. At first, it was subtle: pots and pans became dirty all of a sudden, my computer started to glitch, flies were infesting the garden as though a rotting corpse emerged there, kitchen meals felt undercooked or overcooked no matter what I did, kibble went missing, and there was even the stench of blood and semen in some areas of the house. To me, those were blatant exhibitions of bad luck or house renovation that were not updated for whatever reasons.

This was no bloody *Goosebumps* book; the inadequacies of centuries-old architecture could torment anyone.

Then the dreams came…oh, the feckin’ dreams.

Almost every week, for three months, I was unsettled by nightmares of my ex-wife threatening to take back all my possessions with the eyes hollow and a voice like a banshee. Other times, I was haunted by fears of my daughter becoming destitute at a young age and all the shadows that would lurk from every auspice, about to suffocate me in bed. And almost every week, I would wake up with the lobes of my ears slightly cut, startling me.

Dr. Gorman claimed my ears could be sensitive to nighttime thrashing, but that's no justification; I've never had an upset bed rest before moving to this house. I suspected there was something even more unnatural when Kendell incessantly barked seemingly at nothing in the basement, and my daughter cried over long scratches on her back that, from inspecting them, only human fingers could cause.

"Perhaps she tripped behind a sharp shrub in the garden," the physician claimed.

More lies, more bloody lies.

Those maladies weren't accidents; I would know when Michelle approached the garden. I refused to believe what was

happening in our home was a string of coincidental misadventures; something smelled fishy. I rooted out every square inch of this forsaken house, leaving no stone unturned and avoiding Michelle's superstitious imagination by reassuring her all her worries would be over soon.

And you know what my eyes discovered?

Nothing, no trace of spectral phenomena, no pranks, no tricks – until four days later when my computer plug went missing, and I discovered it in the back garden.

Probably some teenage bloke who burgled my bloody office while I was tuckered out, I thought.

Then, as I pulled the soil-caked cord towards me, a puddle from last week's downpour revealed what I assumed to be a half-decayed man with seven stab marks on his body. This was no laughing matter; I saw a corpse, gored and all in a puddle but invisible if you look behind.

An optical illusion, it must be. My head is playing bloody charades.

Suddenly, my conscience started taunting me.

“Remember Disneyland? Remember your marriage? Remember the life you left behind?”

I refused to listen.

Supernatural garbage is not stemmed in reality, I told myself.

Then, I took a second glance, and all was well. There was nothing in the puddle but my own relieved reflection. I would sleep and enjoy life peacefully for the next two days until I heard my daughter scream from the downstairs living room. A portrait of the sculptor himself was smeared with fresh blood as thick as paint. After calling the authorities, they assumed someone was performing a Satanic ritual as if a Tom, Dick, or Harry would have the time to do that on our property. Unfortunately, the stain wouldn’t wash off, and the police decided to leave that ghastly portrait alone. I was disappointed.

For all this time we settled into this house, playing, working, eating, sitting, sleeping, my daughter urged me to live in

another place, a less haunted place, even after the cleanup was finished. Again, I convinced her not to make any fuss about the house even if my breath was a wee cold from the thought of some demented kid smearing blood on the canvas. It was near Halloween, after all.

Perhaps those blokes were just too bloody thick to notice the calendar, I thought.

On October 31, I partook in the holiday by dressing my daughter as a bee and accompanying her from house to house yet stopped after five minutes thanks to the atmosphere getting to her.

“Please take me back, Daddy!” Michelle howled.

She was so frightened by the decorations, the mannequins, audio, and hanging dolls; Michele thought every house was haunted. I couldn’t blame her. Halloween should fuck itself in the arse with all its worship of horror. Yet, nothing significant happened in the house after we returned home. Even in its glorious adornment of scares, tricks, and treats, things went silent for a while.

Ironically, it was only on a hectic Tuesday night in the middle of November when the king of fear brought home a welcome-back present. In the shower, I tried washing myself of a dream where the white marble bust of the sculptor turned to me and begged for freedom as its edifice eroded before my horrified eyes. For a reason I couldn't explain at the time, I imagined each water droplet to be like a small dagger; drop by drop, an artificial sensation pained me. I immediately shut the showerhead off and hurried in a rush out of the tub only to encounter a questionable mystery: The towel was not in its rightful place!

Not only did some fucker raise the shower temperature too high (even though it was lukewarm when I entered), but my hairy cock and bollocks were exposed.

It must've been one of Michelle's tricks up her sleeve as retribution for making her stay here, I thought.

My choice was to pilfer her room for that bloody thing.

Alas, when I entered uninvited and scoured every nook and cranny, as she was

getting more pissed off than a pelican consuming a gallon of prune juice, there was nothing except clothes and dolls. Hell, Michelle even remarked impatiently, “Why would I steal your towel, Daddy? I have my own.”

Then her head cocked sideways as if not to show embarrassment of my nudity. I forgot for a moment that my daughter was mature for her age, as if her brain was transplanted with that of an eleven-year-old during her last medical appointment. So, as I promised not to disturb her anymore, I resigned myself to bed, vowing to purchase a new towel tomorrow. But when I opened my drawer, my clothes were absent too, not just the pyjamas I usually wore but briefs, shirts, trousers, the whole bloody circus. I questioned my child again, and I predictably received no satisfying reply but hostility, impatience, and embarrassment. Being interrogated by one’s father twice in one night is one thing but burning one’s eyes on his privates is another beast.

Thus, I decided to order new garments online, quickly performed my task, and dozed off to sleep in a bed two rooms across from hers. Every light was turned off, every door was closed, every window was curtained, and

the dog sat comfortably on his bed with a refilled bowl nearby.

Peace and quiet.

Well, I would've gotten some shuteye if I didn't hear footsteps tapping step after step. It couldn't be Michelle; she was fast asleep, and her door was closed. It couldn't be Kendell; the steps would've been faster and lower.

Maybe it was Jacob Marley looking for another bloke to haunt with moral lessons and experiences through time, I sarcastically suggested.

Good thing I'm no stingy wanker. Every earned quid was saved into my bank account and my daughter's. Then I saw a silver-hued woman emerge from the top of the stairs and walk feet towards my bed, towel wrapped around her body like an avant-garde actress. After seconds of awkwardness without any murmur, she tossed it aside, exposing her parts, and prowled inch by inch into my bed. I tried to raise myself, but…but…

I was paralyzed from the waist down. Not by any physical handicap but mental restraint. The young, luscious woman seemed

to be in her late twenties, early thirties tops, with her Edwardian locks contrasting a sagging chest and a scarecrow-like face. I realized that the ghost stories were true: she was the spirit of the murderous prostitute Sheila O'Connor. I suddenly remembered: That mirage from the bloody puddle was one of her victims buried beneath the soil, probably even the irrelevant artist himself.

I had permission from the city commissioner to dig the garden plots, if only for a day. I discovered a skeleton with broken bones from stab wounds. The illusion was gone, and the truth revealed itself.

And that dream of mine, the marble sculpture begging for liberation? That must've been Fife's spirit pleading with me to abandon the place of his death.

Now, I felt like the next victim as the malevolent spirit clutched a solid, nontransparent knife that I presume came from the kitchen and prepared to shiv me. My dilating eyes, heavy breathing, quaking body, sweating skin, and stood-out hair prepared for the worst, but just as the blade was inches from my throat, the danger stopped. She suddenly galloped away in the form of mist by what I noticed was another spirit who flew in

from the closet like a gust of wind. I didn't know who it was; it might've been that sculptor protecting me from ending up like her. My cold, damp head told me I wanted to, no, I NEEDED to, get out of here for my life – no, the life of my daughter.

The encounter reminded me too much of a traumatic memory. Even though murder was her goal, the way she sadistically smiled and slithered her feet and ebbed her waist and motioned her arms, even pulling away the covers masking my genitals, gave me another implication.

I was about to be raped - by a woman! An undead, intangible woman yet a woman nevertheless!

The media tends to pay no heed to sexual assault cases by women on men, only the opposite. Worse, in my youth, I had a fling with an older albeit fairly attractive woman who took advantage of my naivete and left me hooked on drugs after sex.

Who else can say that a memory like that can resurfaced in the form of a wavy-haired, vicious, fair-skinned poltergeist, who eerily looked similar to my victimizer? It now haunts

my subconsciousness, and I never wanted to see that damned place again. My screams were so chaotic that both Michelle and Kendell came running out of concern, even in a room of darkness. I was broken into emotional pieces as I told her that, indeed, a ghost was haunting this house. The scratches on my daughter's back, the dog barking at seemingly nothing, the blood smears on the portrait, the skeleton in the grave, the missing computer cord, the empty towels and clothes, my ears razed almost every week, the nightmares I've experienced, it was all because of that tosser.

So, what was my course of action?

Well, the next day, I sold the house to the Baron of Atheol with the excuse of the air being too intolerable for me, my daughter, and my dog. I then drove them someplace better, someplace that didn't have a complex history, someplace less eerie than what we once had. Furthermore, I needed weeks of therapy to shred the trauma exerted on me. Even if my new psychiatrist didn't believe one syllable that came out of my lips, he would still empathize with my experience.

Unfortunately, he was just like the rest

“Mr. McCullough, I believe you’ve gone through such a traumatic experience of being nearly raped in your past that your mind has developed psychosis,” Dr. Wallace boldly claimed while leaning on his fancy chair. “The hauntings you’ve claimed to witness can be justified as tricks of the mind, hallucinations, mere nightmares. I’ve heard enough ghost tales in my time to understand how distorted they are.”

I couldn’t get through to that tosser; no one but me and Sheila’s past and future victims will know the truth in that damned place.

The only thing I could do after exiting the clinic was repeated my first therapist’s advice for closure.

Now calm myself, calm myself, calm. Don’t look back, don’t stare, don’t even blink.

Reykjavík 2074 Winter Olympic Games

Ice. Grace. Publicity.

These are the words you will most likely hear from every Winter Olympic Game. This is no exception. It has been one hundred seventy

years since the first international competition, and only now has Reykjavík become a host city. My country, the home of hot springs, grazing wildlife, and the nicest people you will ever meet. It's also home to my father Sindri, who earned many medals from 2040 through 2056 as a distance runner. He always prided achievement over anything else, which is why he was disappointed when I stopped skating at age sixteen.

My name is Agnes Frenison, and I adored skipping across ice rinks and frozen ponds, wearing bladed boots, and hearing a large clink from my heels scraping on ice ever since my mother Katla taught me at age five.

I made figure eights, performed on one leg, even spread my legs and clamped them together without resulting in a painful slip. Both my friends at school and my parents often clapped until their hands tired. Despite my stature (I remain five foot two.), I was a prodigy when it came to ice skating, making some envious, especially from Helga Strum.

Ever since elementary school, we hated each other, and I could tell by her appearance that she was destined to be a female Draco. With her prim and proper pigtails and her freckled face, Helga was a snotty know-it-all who believed that someone like me didn't

deserve such a gift. In fact, by high school, that bitch cursed me during every performance she attended, spewing out colorful language she must have borrowed from her father. Of course, I ignored her scornful, petty words, but her curses must've been visible to leave an impression on me. The day I retired from the sport was the day when Old Man Winter blew over Iceland, and Hálsón, one of the greatest lakes in our country, was frozen over like a bedsheet.

On January 30 of 2064, authorities forbade visitors from walking on the frozen lake since the ice was fragile. Over the past five years, forty-three lives were lost in these waters, waters that covered over four hundred thousand acres of land and had a depth of over two thousand feet. Nevertheless, I was stubborn enough to ignore the warnings, claiming that my ice-skating practice gave me privilege. While my overcautious mother and officers cackled like hens, Helga’s reaction was different, going for the verbal dagger.

“I wouldn’t mourn you if you fell under the ice and drowned,” Helga informed me with a sadistic smile on her face.

Only my father encouraged me to take such a risk.

“Don't let the lame and the lazy tell you what you can't do with your talent,” he often advised during my life.

It was my dream to skate across such a grand reservoir. Imagine what my next goal would’ve been if I had succeeded?

The North Sea? One of the North American Great Lakes?

However, I only made it a minute out there. A minute of confidently skating and smiling at my gleaming reflection on the surface before it cracked larger and larger every few seconds.

Before I had the time to melt my anxiety into panic, the ice below my feet collapsed, and I fell into the water, splashing violently to stay alive. I never partook in swimming lessons, even though my father wanted me to. I had no interest in wearing a tight swimsuit and ungracefully waddling in the water.

Every time I emerged back to the surface, I sank deeper and deeper. It was almost like entering purgatory, having to struggle to keep my head and throat above the frozen surface. It didn’t help that the skates on my feet felt like a pair of bladed anchors. I could hear my parents panic and call for a lifeguard. If he was late by seconds, my

eyesight could've blacked out permanently, and the lake would've claimed my body. Unfortunately, it was too late to save me from developing a fear of drowning.

I spent weeks in the hospital, paralyzed in my bed, suffering from hallucinations of water filling my lungs, my life almost flying away from my body, or the floor collapsing before me. No matter how many times my parents visited me or how many gifts were sent, the nightmares never stopped. Not everyone was so considerate. Helga approached my room, not to check on me but express her satisfaction at my misery.

Later, when I noticed that the windows gave way to a gorgeous view of the maritime horizon, my nerves started to jolt, and a walrus-whiskered doctor diagnosed me with aquaphobia, a rare but well-known condition among my people. There wasn’t a cure for this, and it deprived me of the ability to ride a marine cruise or enter a bathtub without convulsing in fear. I had to borrow my mother’s shower instead. Most importantly, I could never skate again, not even in rinks not made of ice. I had the irrational inner fear of being submerged kept me awake during some nights.

It took months of therapy even to get me relieved of seeing bodies of water or dip my toes in the bathtub, but those were the limits as far as I was concerned. I tried testing myself out on other sports to ease the pain: tennis, football, track. How pathetic was I that not one of them captured my attention for more than a week?

My continual abandonment of every competition and lacking energy incensed my father to the point where he would throw abuses, telling me what a horrible daughter I was and that I needed to earn back his approval. I never thought of my father as anything but a kind man for most of my life. He was stern and pushed me to make the most out of my talent, but rarely did he slap or spurt venom on me. Alas, that was the past, and Pabbi seemed almost unrecognizable after months of frustration. My full attention was now on my mother.

She was less anger-prone, helping me work hard at graduating high school and attending the University of Iceland whenever my grades turned against me. We would watch famous movies dubbed in our language, listen to Björk and other noteworthy musicians, and even try out fine cuisine. If you ask me, Mamma is a great cook. Her smoked haddock and puffin always felt like food from the gods,

untainted by egg friers or whatever appliances Americans brought with them and using only natural cookware.

However, after a year at university, my father made a curt announcement: “I can’t stand living in this house with a coward for a daughter and a coddling influence for a wife. Tonight, I’m packing my bags and leaving you. I’m sorry.”

Thus, with his belongings, he also took two-thirds of family income. We Frenisons were not a poor family, nor were we wealthy; despite Pabbi’s fame, the house was left struggling.

I decided to save enough to earn an associate’s degree and attend the Iceland Academy of the Arts so that I could find my true passion. I was not very proficient at writing, nor music, nor knowledge of media, but my skills lay in the art of drawing. Whether I would concentrate on furniture, animals, people, or even cuisine, they were enough to impress my illustration teacher Mr. Junger to pay me three-hundred-forty-three króna for every drawing he kept; that was $2.79 in American dollars. The money was enough to stabilize our income while Mama grew cabbage and rutabaga for sale, but a strong conscience in my mind made me regret

having abandoned my childhood pleasure, of giving up on my athletic passions just because of a single traumatic accident. As much as drawing became a part of my life, skating WAS my life; it was to me as live mice were to a cat, not necessary but incapable of complete abstention. If I had to return to what I knew best, I had to overcome my aquaphobia and be accepted into the winter sports program.

Day after day, I was denied due to my psychological profile, but I eventually got around this by claiming that I was planning to be a snowball rolling champion (added in the 2038 Games). Truth be told, I've never rolled a snowball in my life and thought such a simple children's activity shouldn’t be elevated to a professional sport, let alone an Olympic one. Nevertheless, that was none of my concern. Once I was accepted, I quickly changed my route and joined a class for ice skaters. The instructor was Mrs. Sarsgaard, an imposing old woman with a face like a grumpy bulldog and the stature of a wrestler. From the start, she was suspicious about my participation.

“You look like someone who wouldn’t make it a day in this course,” Sarsgaard curtly told me. “You should have stuck with snowball rolling.”

I greeted her with a friendly face, but I could tell by her icy eyes she didn't want me here. No “Father Olympian” story would change her mind; she claimed to have denied countless youngsters who prepared such an excuse. But Mamma intervened to give me a chance. I could always count on her support, even if she were nervous about me suffering another accident and perhaps never involving myself in sports again. Despite the strength of my mother's defense, Mrs. Sarsgaard decided not to make it easy for me. She was a stern teacher who restricted access to the indoor rink and scolded me whenever tension persuaded me to give up control of my body.

The place was impressive, likely built only ten years ago with the aesthetics of a bowling alley and the scale of a hockey arena.

From Day Six to Day Twenty-three, my mind would hallucinate the opaque floor as if it were ice, and I would slip over and over. Buzzers would honk constantly, electronic points would be docked, and I was forced to practice on the wood beneath the rink before comfortable skating on plastic.

This would continue for a couple of months, and I was at the brink of failing the course, yet my results were reversed as by G-d’s miracle. Sarsgaard wasn't impressed. One

day, she coldly walked me to her office and belittled my lack of improvement. Shortly, though, her gaunt, wrinkled face fell forward, her hand joints relaxed, and veins reined in as she surprised me with a story of her own. Through a video recorder and photo album, I was introduced to someone just as human as me.

Forty years ago, she was a well-known figure skater who played at many championships, local and international, yet failed to volunteer at the Olympics. Why? Because, just like me, Sarsgaard developed a fear of water due to cracking the ice and almost drowning. And, just like me, she also felt like her lifetime pride was over in an instant, though she worked hard and conditioned herself to imagine peaceful waves instead of turbulent water. After achieving her dream at the 2026 Olympics, Sarsgaard now operates as a university coach more than a professional athlete. Still, she displayed her preserved aptitude on the indoor rink, figure eights, jumps, and one-legged techniques.

Even at age sixty-two, my instructor had the figure of someone a couple of decades her junior - thin, strong, graceful. She admitted that I was the first aquaphobic student in her class though surprised that I did not adapt to my condition.

“You could’ve participated in bobsledding for G-d's sake!” Sarsgaard railed at me.

I argued that the metal blades skidding against the reflective, crystal surface was my core passion.

“Very well,” she apathetically resigned herself.

Her smile indicated satisfaction at that response as she seemingly ordered me to follow her advice to a tee, as Americans would say. I did just that, every day, every week, every month, for a whole two years, conditioning myself with meditation, stress balls, and practice. Gradually, the coach opened up space in the rink for me as I got more comfortable with the surface textures and began to rely less on nonstick floor padding. Occasionally, I would slip, and my instructor would judge me for every mistake, but I could tell she was proud of my progress. Unfortunately, I was still incapable of performing tricks, being frozen and anxious over the thought of shuttering my legs due to aquaphobia.

That was why I ranked twenty-ninth out of forty students in the class by the time the second year ended. Fortunately, my progress was substantial enough that I earned another

year of training, forced to sacrifice drawing class as my career choice was not in illustration.

Before leaving the last day of class, I saw Mr. Junger looking ashamed that I would abandon such a creative pursuit. In four years, he called me one of his most skilled students. As great as my experience was in his class, my biggest honor had to be earning a prized trophy in skating: gold, silver, bronze, it did not matter. I needed to be good enough for my achievements to be cast in metal.

Next year, I was comfortable with tricks and specials to the point where I was now #14 in my class.

And the year afterward? My rank was graded at #6.

The secret to my success? Relaxation.

Despite being put in a convincing virtual reality simulator where I imagined the floor as natural ice and crowds watching me, I told myself, *“This is not real. This is only a simulation.”*

By the time my experience at the Iceland Academy of the Arts came to an end, I was ranked #1 and earned a diploma for it. It took four years of grueling practice for me to feel like I've mostly overcome aquaphobia, but I

needed perhaps another four years of competition before I would be able to prove that I was on top of the game.

First, I competed for my school against various others, earning about as much as twelve thousand króna. That was enough to purchase my own home while Mamma tried to recover Pabbi. It was a comfortable one-story cottage, not fit for royalty but more an amateur athlete, with insulated bricks and rugs and beds made of moose skin. Then, the competition expanded beyond the school district and into every academy throughout the country.

By the time I turned twenty-six, my athletics prowess was heard throughout Iceland, and I was able to earn many trophies, most in gold. I was so happy with my rapid progress, even if it required sponsorship deals, merchandise sales, and agreement to license my likeness for video games.

On August 3, 2072, Pabbi called me, agreeing to return home at the airport. Through his warped voice, my father said he was proud that I was returning to the sport he encouraged me to pursue. Unfortunately, upon arriving at Aisle Twenty-two, he came with a woman by his side, with silky hair as black as a raven and a face that screamed thirty-five

with a body that screamed fifty. She was Tabitha Grimauld, the Canadian Taekwondo champion who won gold at the 2048 Olympics, and he happened to be engaged to her while visiting another part of Iceland. I was shocked hard, but my mother even more so, she was STEAMING and refused to talk to him, even selling off her wedding ring. It took several months to restore the relationship partially, and Papa justified his actions.

“Our marriage was already deteriorating by the time my daughter quit,” he defensively argued. “What else could I do?”

My father thought that finding a soulmate in a fellow athlete could fix his depression, could help him get over his disappointment. I'm a quick forgiver, you know. If the explanation made sense and the perpetrator felt sorry for his actions, I have no reason to pull a grudge. However, he didn't apologize, so I didn't forgive him.

By this point, my accomplishments were getting attention from the Icelandic Olympic Committee, and after four years of participating in one championship after the next, I was invited to join the national team for the 2074 Olympics. It was fortunate that the place where I was staying until the games began was only a pond skip away from home,

or else Mamma would've been tense about being left alone with Papa and his nice and attractive but ignorant fiancée. But I was an independent woman with an income of my own, and my parents couldn't hog me down. I had to accept the decision even as Pabbi warned that my resistance against aquaphobia wouldn’t last in the biggest of leagues.

I wasn’t going to skate on artificial ice fields the size of soccer stadiums anymore. I was going to challenge myself to a smaller yet more imposing lake at the center of the capital. Sure, I knew that Tjörnin was only two feet deep, yet the memories of drowning still swept me. Pabbi's fiancé saw things differently, she encouraged my inner strength by telling me, even if I were to lose and risk injury, it would still mean I tried. Even if I couldn't completely understand her English and only knew about her through television and tabloids, I liked Tabitha.

This was not my first experience with the Games. My father forced me to view it every two years to educate me on the universal rules of sportsmanship and hard work. The Olympic torch, the multicolored rinks, the costumed mascots, and the anthem, those images were integrated into my competitive life like a bratwurst would from a German. However,

this would be the first time I was a participant, not merely an observer; it scared me.

Meeting up with the rest of the team at the doors of a blue and pink limousine, I said farewell to my waving family as we drove twenty-six miles to the snowcapped yet welcoming Olympic Village. I realized along the way that Helga Strum was part of the team, sitting an aisle away. I asked her which game she was playing, both figuratively and literally. Unfortunately, the aisle was composed of seventeen seats in front of me, so she could barely hear anything but the humming of the wheels and the bubbly sound of pop music. It wasn't until we arrived at the destination and departed the pine-scented car that I reiterated my question. Helga looked just as surprised as I was since I was knee-deep into quitting ice skating the last time she heard of me. I asked her what she is doing here since Helga never expressed interest in the sport.

What was her reply?

“If you want to know so badly, I tried ice skating shortly after you gave up. I was quite a talent. And unlike others, I didn’t drop the sport because of some pathetic fear. My leg was shattered ten years ago. Now, I have to play this stupid luge race with three losers.”

She continued her monologue by hissing, “What are you in for, curling?”

When I replied that I had recovered from my condition that she couldn't and returned to the activity I loved, I noticed a look of envy in the bitch’s eye; that gave me satisfaction. Helga was even angrier once we entered the Olympic Village. Her dorm was opposite mine by random call numbers. I wasn’t pleased either, but it would be foolhardy for teammates to distrust each other when we should be working together for the gold.

Coach Vindensen was a more laidback teacher than Mrs. Sarsgaard; he was open to suggestions on improving morale, had a controlled temper whenever an athlete of his made a mistake, and ordered the most comfortable room service imaginable. The beds were prim and decorated in the motherland's colors, the floors and walls were mostly clean of grime and spat, winter sports simulators were available in the recreational room, and the breakfast and dinner were exquisite as if made from Valhalla: Sauteed reindeer, runny omelets, organic free-range halibut. Even Mamma did not have the money to afford such luxury. One of the bobsled team members produced a painful, allergic reaction to the cinnamon that was spiced in a dish he was served; Hans Vukner, I think his name

was. It forced the rest of the team to continue without him. We were all dressed in our Olympic clothing to prepare the first day, most in high polymer winter coats with the national colors of red, white, and blue.

But for me? Like required of an ice skater, colorful spandex was laced tight around my skin as if I were a flamenco dancer. Of course, I lacked a partner, my world act was solo. Let some other women like Elsa Haneji have fun with a man.

Just a week after Team Iceland arrived and trained at the Olympic Village, the opening ceremony began at the Laugardalsvöllur which once hosted football matches. As we were the host country, our team was the first to present themselves. Marchers waved the red-on-white cross smothered by blue, and soldiers saluted fourteen guns. Lofsöngur, my home's beloved national anthem, played to the hearts of four billion watchers, the largest in history. With all the garters and the president's speech on the need to renew civility in international politics, I expected the motherland would finally be taken seriously in the West and not just regarded as a developing country with sheep and fishers.

Unfortunately, the promoters had to unveil their mascots: a humanoid seal named Olaf and a polar bear named Sonja. Ever since the final designs were announced at the International Olympics Committee, I hated those ugly mascots with their hip winter wear and stupid, exaggerated faces; they never seemed to represent my culture well.

Why not emulate Rome's example? I thought.

In 2040, their mascots were Carnival revelers. Worse, since Olympic rules changed ten years ago, holographic animations were now standard. They could perform jigs and throw out obnoxious voices as if they belonged in an educational cartoon. If it were up to me, I would've petitioned for those dumb, childish embarrassments to stay out of everyone’s sight except at cheap birthday parties. But this wasn't my call. I wasn't an official; I wasn't a member of the IOC. What right did I have to choose which mascots should be eliminated and which ones shouldn’t?

We just had to be at the opening for a minimum of an hour before another national team would step on the podium and express their culture. I knew that, out of a crowd of millions of spectators, my parents, though divorced, were watching and cheering for me

alongside my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, and my grandparents.

I didn't get along on the best of terms with my extended family. Uncle Agnar hated ice skating, calling it a glorified exhibition of ballerinas, not athletes while Aunt Birgitta was even more concerned about the possibility of extreme injury, if not death, more than Mamma was. Cousin Bjorn had schizophrenia and lived in a sanitarium since age fourteen for pricking his skin with the edge of a toothpick. And my grandparents? Well, they were under the mindset that females were too frail to be engaged in athleticism. Their seating on the bleachers was a family obligation, nothing more.

I did always have a special place for Grandpabbi Erik. He may not have been an athlete like Pabbi, let alone an Olympian, but he adored sports with all his heart. The only reason he wasn’t capable of playing games like curling and hockey was the chronic lung condition he lived with all his life. Erik's maker met him seventeen years ago, and it was too late for him to witness my moment of glory. None of us were particularly Christian. We didn't attend any church, but I prayed to the Almighty that my misfortunes would be temporary and that Grandpabbi would return

from heaven to visit me. I was sure my second wish came true; it had to be.

While I had my free time, I would contact my family by Zoom; I was permitted a laptop, Windows 15. It was the most convenient way to communicate in this brave new society where even physical books were rare.

I never bothered to make friends with anyone on the team, although a hockey player named Aamir Al-Nijambi was clearly into me. I declined to return the favor, but I could tell he never seemed to accept fully. He felt his exotic looks were alluring to European women. His team coupled against Korea's on the first day, and it was a close hit of 14-13 while snowboarder Georg Laagorn was beaten by his Swedish rival in just three seconds. For the first nine days, Team Iceland and its competitors were bouncing each other in scores and medals, but, on Day Ten, it was my turn to go for the gold. I was still keeping my aquaphobia in check with mental exercise for the past few days, yet there was a chill down my spine. I was to compete against fifty countries, observed by over one hundred fifty thousand people at the stadium and three billion on televised airwaves. Not to mention, I would be skating on the dreaded bane of my existence: Tjörnin.

My appetite for breakfast was still as sufficient as ever, but afterward? Misfortune.

At 9 A.M., I departed from Olympic Village and arrived at the stadium built around the lake, bones so chilly you could hear them squeak. The radios in our rooms did say that February 12 was 18˚ Celsius, but since my figure skating gear was skintight and not covering my legs nor my hands, I was among the only ones at the stadium not properly suited for the weather. The entire audience and even the stern judges wore insulated coats. Fortunately, my uniform was made of a special material that trapped heat so my body would still be relatively warm even when exposed to frigid temperatures. The cold was the least of my worries, though. My anxiety is what wore me down.

There were three rounds, each more complex than the last and culminating in fifty minutes of performance. Figure eights, high jumps, spread, and closed legs. Those techniques were signature to me, and I mastered them by this point. However, that recollected talent began to vanish in an instant.

My conscience kept insisting, *You're not going to drown. The ice isn't going to shatter*

below. Just keep calm and you'll make it. Imagine cleaning th-

My body immediately rejected not only the end of the sentence but the requests themselves. *Nutcracker Suite* played through the airwaves, distracting music just like in the training grounds.

Why is that a tradition? I always thought. *Why does only ice skating require music?*

It was thanks to such music that, in the middle of the first round, I suddenly felt extreme vertigo, and my heartbeat and breaths rose faster than it ever was before.

Why can't I stop imagining cracks in the crystal reflection? I kept telling myself.

The consequence was that my fluidity and speed on those figure eights churned like molasses, turning what could've easily been a ten out of ten into a seven. Second round, my legs grew too stiff from fear to perform expert leaps and bounds anymore. Five out of ten. Third round, aquaphobia so distracted my mind that my wide and closed leg slide caused me to trip, trip thirty times, forty-five times, two out of ten. I could feel Mrs. Sarsgaard on the other side of the ice, making light on my failure.

“What did I tell you? You’re not good enough.”

I could imagine Helga watching from her room, smirking that she got the final laugh. That bitch may have broken her leg but not on television, not in front of billions.

I ultimately placed forty-three out of fifty, not even earning a bronze medal. Imagine the shame my pathetic performance brought not only to watchers around the world but my parents as well. All that work, strength, and mental fortitude were for nothing in the end. I could see that the second my points were scored, my father regained his disappointment, his view that I wasn't the expected daughter he thought I was. I would’ve cried right now if it didn't embarrass me any further.

Ever since my dishonorable performance, I closed down Zoom and refused to call or write a letter for fear I would receive a retaliatory response in return. My self-inflicted punishment, though, was that I couldn't eat or drink or even express myself publicly in a positive way. The one activity I did was watch the televised match between Helga Strom’s luge riding team and Finland's. When she earned fourth place with no medal, I gained a sense of sadistic pleasure. Oh, and I

also played rounds of a winter Olympics simulator. Every time, I fumbled and fumbled and fumbled at a simple video game. Damn the music for being a required staple. Even when I muted the sound, I could still hear *Nutcracker Suite* playing.

My skin grew pale, my hands were trembling, and my mind agonized with the thought, *I was THIS close! I was THIS close to making it! How could it blow up in my face?!*

The Olympic team was concerned with my unhealthy depression, even the usually nonchalant coach. It took Katrin Anvelkem, captain of the bobsled team, to offer a hand. Another member pulled her hamstring during a practice run, and she needed two substitutes to be qualified for the final day of the Games.

Good thing that fourteen years ago, it became legal for any Olympian who had already participated in one sport to take the place of an absent or injured participant of another sport. I wasn't at all injured during my ice-skating follies, perhaps bruised a little bad that it was so trivial all it took was one day of packed ice to heal. The other replacement was Marta Fyronnok, a hockey player who overslept when her team played and had to be replaced herself. Funny, as if by G-d’s will, both of us happened to be caught in

unfortunate circumstances and forced into the same sport to make up for lost glory.

I remembered Tabitha's words: “If you don’t succeed, that’s A-OK. It’s the try that matters, and if you don’t try, then you’re missing out.”

For the first time, I would be trying a new sport, and enjoying it, even in the rush of the few days we had left before a public demonstration. If I did well at team cooperation, then ice skating wouldn't be my reserved life anymore. New possibilities would be as open as a customer choosing different sandwich ingredients. As such, my position was the caboose of the track as I had the least experience in bobsledding, if you would even call playing a VR winter Olympics simulator “experience”.

I had to shed my skintight uniform for a heavy jacket, pants, goggles, gloves, and boots adorned in the pattern of the flag. Good riddance, that objectifying hodgepodge was already partially torn from the hips due to all that tripping. Had the rounds been longer, my performance would've been denigrated to a wardrobe malfunction. Besides, I deserved the extra protection, clothing that's wholly insulated in all the parts that were covered.

I made a new friend in Marta even though we played completely different sports before. There wasn’t enough free time before the day of the demonstration to develop a bond as we would've wanted. But every breakfast and dinner, we would hang out, and Marta would share her shortcomings and advise how to adapt to them.

Would I call us close friends?

No, it would take more than five days to be considered that. But such a quota didn't matter when it came to the Winter Olympics, only merit and skill. As the opposition was trouncing both male and female athletes on our shores, our trial runs commenced, and they exhilarated my senses. Imagine a one hundred fifty-kilometer slide going at the rate of fifty mph through as many as five tunnels, taking sharp turns and loops, and making sure that everyone maneuvered their ride accordingly unless they planned to fly off the handle. I heard that bobsledding caused an average of twenty-six injuries and ten fatalities per year.

When I entered high school, my father told me of the tragic end of Alexei Metiuvonic, a Ukrainian bobsledder who perished twenty years ago by being crushed by his vehicle after a drop.

“The impact sounded like a soggy lagkaka hitting the kitchen floor,” he would say.

Dark humor was one of Pabbi's charms.

Still, I was more reminded of the thrills my parents would take me to, especially Viking Village. The boat ride was a fantastic experience into our country's infamous past, but my enjoyment for it ceased once I violently vomited in the middle of a drop. My parents still keep the photoshoot in the old house to this day. Why was I reminiscing about a childhood memory again? I'm twenty-eight now, and I can handle things that make my younger self squeamish.

Even though I sat on the tail end of the bobsled, I felt like I played my part in controlling and stabilizing the vehicle as much as anyone else. Most sports are team efforts. One cannot play well without their comrades joining together in cooperation. I would even call sports the mother of socialism. Pabbi would shun me if he ever caught my words.

“The country fought hard to keep the ruinous Socialist Party out of power,” he often quoted curtly.

Pabbi was more than willing to speak anti-socialist speeches in support or against a

political candidate. Personally, though, I've ignored economics and politics all my life to the point where capitalism, socialism, and communism just meant the same thing to me. If it didn't negatively affect my friends and family, what was the problem?

After six days of training, we were ready for the last day of the Winter Olympics, the final day before the closing ceremony, the final chance to redeem my folly and re-earn confidence in my athletic talent. We were competing against Nunavut, infamous for their long tradition of bobsledding, and many of us feared an effortless loss to a highly skilled opponent. Yet, we played like a team, balancing speed and maneuverability and combining our strengths. No *Blue Danube* was playing at the stadium, no *Nutcracker's Suite*, no music at all. The silence was my specialty. It wouldn't distract my sense of coordination. The arena was different than where I skated, partially indoors with a giant ice slide and a sixty-meter drop with a few bumps along the way. From my experience, it was thrice as large as the training grounds, but that fact didn't frighten me. I embraced such a challenge.

At 10:05 A.M., we entered the arena from the left side of the Olympic Village, looking determined and stone-faced as we set

up our blue, white, and red bobsled on the course. If I relaxed my cheekbones as a sign that everything was going to work out, I would've jinxed myself in the worst possible way. Finally, my family was watching from their TV screens since they didn't expect me to compete in the same Olympics twice. I proved their disappointment wrong in every end.

3… 2… 1… Vinna!

Zoom! The bobsleds raced, plunging at the rate of 45 mph.

Zoom! We felt clung by Father Gravity, our bobsled accelerating like a bullet train.

Zoom! Snow suddenly poured from the sky, making it difficult to see anything.

Nunavut won the first round due to their better acquaintance with the forces of winter, but we surpassed them in the succeeding rounds, first by pure skill, then by pure luck. The engine was smoky and clogged with snow during the final round, making our ride slow and unsteady. The other teammate I did not mention, Karl Thorg, thought this was an omen from G-d that our cockiness would be the death of us all while the others were cursing upon the ground for the misfortune, but I, a reborn optimist, told them to push on and on and on. Then, by sheer miracle, we

made it - just by a half centimeter ahead of the competition. Imagine that: a bobsled team so burdened by natural forces still achieved victory via skill, will, and most of all, teamwork. The results were so shocking, bizarre, and unforeseen that it took a third look for the judges to confirm Team Iceland won by a hair. And that was great news for us as we celebrated our triumph with Brennivin, Lilli-Jon, and other spirits during dinner.

I did not drink because I am very health conscious, but I saw nothing wrong with screaming “Skal!” and raising a cold, bubbly, brown glass. For once in my lifetime, I felt queasy after guzzling down five shots, but I had enough time to Zoom with my family before inducing myself to the Village toilet. They were highly pleased by the results, by the gold medal hanging around my neck, by the fact I learned from my failures and tried something new. Pabbi admitted he was disappointed that my eight years of ice-skating efforts lacked fruit, but not enough to leave my family again.

As my father told me, “I am happy you finally found your dream.”

By his philosophy, teamwork is just as essential as solo athletics. Even Pabbi sometimes participated in four-person runner

rallies and canoe races in his youth. I was also surprised by Mrs. Sarsgaard deciding to pay a visit. Even though I failed at the one sport she trained me in all those years, Sarsgaard was satisfied that I at least accomplished something through teamwork.

“I never thought my brazen request that you take bobsledding would impact you,” she remarked.

I was even surprised by Helga deciding to apologize for her history of bullying and arrogance, after the party. She regarded her envy as the catalyst and claimed that earning fourth place at luge riding humbled her. I appreciated the gesture even with my throat on fire as I awaited the closing ceremony.

Day Eighteen: At 11:09 A.M., all of us entered the Laugardalsvollur and listened as the president announced the rankings: Norway in third place, Iceland in second place, and America predictably on top. Their anthem, their panners, their athletes were the ones in front and center as they earned the most gold and silver medals. The news was underwhelming, but most of us accepted it enough to be satisfied by such close achievement. Once again, my family was in attendance as the team celebrated one final drinking party before all athletes departed the

Olympic Village. The Games may have lasted less than three weeks, but for me, they felt like months. It was such a colossal adventure, trials and tribulations, hardships and successes.

I know now that while ice skating remains in my blood, it is not my only calling. I will have to play it safe on the rink for now, but I will persevere in other sports: Skiing, curling, snowboarding, hockey, and yes, even snowball fighting and rolling. Who knows? Perhaps, I'll return to drawing on occasion when I feel bored of physical activity. One can never say you have too many hobbies.

The family situation seems to be healing, with Pabbi commenting that he will perhaps remarry and have two wives for company. The motherland legalized polygamy twenty-four years ago, yet despite her jealousy, Mamma did not seem concerned. She just wanted him back – permanently.

As for me, the quarter cut (six million króna) I earned from the bobsledding team allowed me to purchase a more upscale cottage with stones and paintings dating back to the 14th century. Of course, I also donated much of the money to local charities as they would fund hospitals and schools that desperately needed improvement. I faded from

national celebrity status by the end of the day, but I didn't mind it. The fame revolving around my life story got too much for me, intruding on my privacy and all. I have no desire for a husband, wife, dog, or cat, but perhaps I might adopt a child. Since my adolescent years, I have wanted to raise the next generation of Frenisons. The future is uncertain, after all.

The only sure thing is, come the 2078 games, I will be ready – always.

Houston 2036 Summer Olympic Games

One hundred forty years. One hundred forty years since Athens first rekindled the flames of Olympia and allowed various nations to dispute peacefully through sport. One hundred forty years later, history repeated itself in Houston, host of the 2036 Olympic Games. And to everyone’s surprise, my beloved home won the laurels this August.

Who am I, you ask?

To my critics, I am El Ratonito, named for my diminutive stature and shy demeanor. But to the rest, it's Ché Tonacio.

Just like many of my fellow Salvadorans, I was raised in a time when cartels ruled and law enforcement was either complacent or allied with them. My mother perished from childbirth, and, at age ten, I lost my father to the murderous hands of the police when he tried to rob an ATM to pay for essential supplies. I could have starved homeless, penniless, and alone if not for my tío Juan. Out of kindness and mercy, he gave me hospice on his small farm and raised me to work hard, no matter the circumstance. Until that moment, I treated Tío like a distant relative who occasionally visited for family gatherings, but now, he’s like a new father.

For a long time, even before I moved to the farm, I loved horses. They are my favorite animals, more than dogs, alpacas, or sheep. My time at the farm taught me to appreciate the strange nature of horses: their feeding style, their wild, stubborn instincts, and their connections to outsiders.

Five years ago, a mother gave birth to a foal who would become my future companion. This weak-legged, innocent foal had a pattern

similar to a splatter painting and eyes as green as an emerald, and I named her Edelmira, after the mother I never knew. We grew a bond, especially since her mother was neglectful. I served Edelmira a spoonful of hay, gave her hand and vocal signals, and even took her around the barn, reins and all. Unfortunately, Tío Juan feared not only his incoming tax returns but the state of Edelmira's health.

Even months later, when she grew twice her original height, her legs were still lame, and she struggled to trot her hooves without assistance. If I could not convince him that the horse would make a much better impression in the future, Tío would have sold her to the glue factory.

“I promise you if you let me train Edelmira to be a proud racehorse, you won't be disappointed,” I pleaded to him. “I don’t want to face any heartbreak.”

“Very well,” my tío begrudgingly replied. “But in this state, she is of no use. This horse needs a strong diet, enough to invigorate her bones.”

Thus, I started feeding Edelmira plenty of nutritious vegetables that slowly built her bonds and made her less sickly, but not to the level of the other horses.

Years went by as our bond grew stronger, with me riding a saddle bought with my tío's money, her wearing iron shoes with my tío's money.

To make up for the payments and lessen the debt's grip on our farm, I helped sell some hogs, a few cows, a couple of sheep, and a row of chicken eggs. Family meals would become more reliable on our crops than our meat and protein. While I appreciate Tío for saving my life and giving me a roof over my head, he was like a police officer, stoic and not much of a conversationalist. One time, I asked him which team he was rooting for during an upcoming fútbol game only for him to disappointingly answer, "Whichever one wins."

My relationship with Edelmira, on the other hand, was much more positive. We were kindred spirits, both physically frail and neglected, yet we achieved the impossible: rose to our positions as successful athletes. You see, I regarded the horse not as an animal but as a friend, a hairy, four-legged

companion. That deep bond helped us win many championships around the country.

It took years, yes.

It took many years of injuries, falls, loss of control, and anxiety before I mastered jockeying, yet the money I earned was enough to reduce my tío’s debt. Not to mention, I met a few friends along the way, one of them being Hector Gutierrez, a Panamanian jockey and winner of two gold medals in Los Angeles and Brisbane. To my keen eye, he visited northward to observe potential rivals for this year's Olympics. Yet, the man, with his clean-shaven, handsome look, was impressed that we managed to defy the odds with the meekness of both horse and rider.

“Tell me, Seňor Tonacio: What is the secret of your accomplishments? I would love to learn from a man who has the figure of a string bean and rides the size of a pony.”

I offered to show him via day-to-day competitions against him and his horse Lanza on a short dirt track provided by my tío after the first horse race for practice. Compared to Edelmira, Lanza is the standard measure of beauty, with a symmetrical milk-white body

complimented by chestnut eyes, a dark mane, and muscle-bound legs. I am not sure what breed it is, just like he never knew what breed mine was. I just called Lanza a purebred while Hector called Edelmira a mutt, but in an innocent way.

On my first race against him, we partook in five laps, and for the first two, my opponent outran me by sheer speed and power. But on the last three, I rested one hand comfortably on my horse's beautiful face, soothed her, and whispered, “Eres rapida.” Translation: “You are fast.”

The once fear-prone and sluggish “mutt” now jolted in energy, and she galloped past her rival, giving Lanza a surprised neigh and Hector a shocked look on his face.

“So, the secret is connection, not power or finesse,” he surmised. “I’m sure to keep that in mind at the Olympics. But for now, I’d love nothing more than another friendly little game.”

And so, the competition continued. Edelmira was rewarded with fresh bunches of apples, slivers of carrots, and treatment for her injuries with every win. On the last day of

training, a rough session forced my companion to slide on her knees. I was tossed into the mud like a crash test dummy, and Edelmira hobbled away back to the barn for scraped knees. Tío may know no more medicine than a restaurant clerk, but his common sense dictated that spare bandages mend any scrape, no matter the intensity. Unfortunately, his age made him forget his bandages, so he used toilet paper from the outhouse.

Trust me, the decision was not as disgusting as it may seem to you, though it forced me to stall my training until Edelmira fully recovered.

Only three things passed my time: farm labor, conversing with my friends, including Hector, over our love of horses, and listening to the radio about the Olympics. My tío was not a fan of international sports.

“Why should we pay frivolous money setting our country up against hundreds of others in the world when half of our people don’t have enough food on their table and the other half are intimidated by cartels? Such wasteful government!” Tio slammed a mug on the kitchen table. He even lambasted the hub's location. “Houston?! The land of spaceflights, desert, and xenophobic gringos?! Do they

think hosting the city would encourage peace with migrants?! It would be better if our capital was hosted instead!”

Ironically after that sentence, he quietly sipped his coffee and sighed like it was tequila before ranting about why I should give up the Olympic dream. However, I wanted to leave the country for a change; I wanted to experience new sights. I wanted to go to Houston and win gold and prove to the world a scrawny, poor Salvadoran and a disabled horse can defy the odds. Besides, I was no longer a kid under the care of a grown-up but a twenty-year-old, and every man that age has to make his own decisions. When Edelmira and I trotted to the capital to meet the Olympic Team, I knew Tío would not be happy, and if anything happened to him, it would be my fault.

Do you know who else was displeased that I would be part of Team El Salvador? The team itself.

They were bewildered by my puny stature and rustic clothes. All of them were highly educated, professional athletes, men and women alike, who built for the highest honor, and I was but a wimpy, five-foot-two farmer who cares for an “imperfect horse”. No

one was more steamed by my presence than Sebastian Zappos, leader of the swimming troupe and a pampered ass who did not understand the hurdles I had to jump through, figuratively and literally.

“Who let this little rat and the diseased dog he's riding on through here?!” he barked.

They questioned my qualifications - my teammates, my coach, even President Querzon, who visited the committee to ensure “our country had the best of the best”.

Only the committee approved my annexation in Team Salvador, but I would prove the rest of them wrong. I would set the bar higher than anyone.

“Work hard.”

That is what my tío taught me.

The team was bussed to the International Airport, though it was an uncomfortable ride. Edelmira crowded the line between the seats while hooked to the tail end and defecated there too. It was a one-hour journey so I couldn't complain.

When the bus met its destination, not only was the odor obnoxious, but the crap had to be scooped up. It was probably the first time a bus ever confronted such a problem. Animals are usually banned unless they are necessary for a sports competition. One athlete joked that someone must have consumed too much chicharrón.

Then, we visited the International Airport, which was giant compared to what I experienced while living off the streets.

Magazine stands, restaurants, gift shops, what else have I missed?

According to Coach Vargas, however, they were nothing but distractions.

“We did not come here to shop. We came to fly.”

Thus, we visited Aisle Fifteen and waited for twenty minutes impatiently while every other plane flew to and from. By the time our plane landed, and we had access to flight, Edelmira was required to be placed in a special carrier with other animals. She probably would have been anxious and full of

dread the entire time, but the administrator declared, “Rules are rules.”

On the plane ride to Houston, my seat on Aisle Twenty was equipped with a digital menu, DVD player, and phone with over a thousand iTunes songs. As part of Team Puerto Rico, they were first-class specialties, especially when the digital menu provided a variety of exotic meals and expensive native cuisine. I was even allowed access to Zoom, though it was useless. None of my family members have a computer. They are as dirt poor as my parents. If my tío wanted to know about the Games and what I am doing there, he had a TV.

Then the time arrived: After five hours, the plane landed at the George Bush Intercontinental Airport, which sounded like it was named for a great man. I do not know much about America's leaders, not even the current president. Edelmira was freed from her compartment shortly before we departed the plane and before the other teams arrived. Again, the airport looked magnificent and a world apart from my upbringing. And again, there were calls for shopping and dining at the various stores just to get a slice of the American experience, but the coach knew it

was only five o’clock. We needed to be at the Olympic Village – now.

Outside the airport, a new world awaited. I heard rumors of America's technological progress: its bullet trains, thousand-foot skyscrapers, and virtual reality. Things have certainly changed over the past one hundred forty years, and not just on the plane. Houston felt like a metropolis, home to electronic signs, fuelless cars, and areas bustling with flora. Even our capital could not compare to it.

After bussing to the Olympic Village and temporarily sharing my horse's bowel problems, we had to dress up in our uniforms for the opening ceremony. It would start at 7:00 A.M., and everyone on the team had to look professional.

“Blue, white, and golden stripes, gente,” the coach hollered to us. “¡Vamanos! ¡Vamanos!”

I was packed with typical jockey gear—helmet, jumpsuit, boots, though Edelmira was kept in a special stable while we visited the hub of the opening ceremony: a soccer stadium. It was occupied by a hundred

thousand attendees, star-studded bands, and even a public announcement of the U.S. President, who, unlike predecessors I've heard of, had long hair, curve lines, and a dainty face. I never thought the Free World's leader would be a woman, especially after they rejected two female candidates, yet here I was, listening to the speech of one who regards the Olympics as a time for world unity, for world progress, for a cease to political divides. I'm not very political, though my father's murder taught me to distrust government authority.

Then, we had to hear hundreds of national anthems from every participating nation, mine included. All I could do was gush when the Himno Nacional de El Salvador played right in the middle. I am sure the rest did under precaution, except for the coach. He walked over to me and whispered in my ear, "Watch out for Portugal and Australia. Your skills with a horse may be as praised as the judges say, but they have trickery on their side. Do not join the mud pile to win. Eh, hombre?"

"Understood," I answered.

Why did he talk to me specifically?

Because I was the runt, and he wanted to make sure I would not screw things up for the team, of course.

We headed back to the Olympic Village without any dinner. It had to wait until tomorrow. All of us needed to sleep in twin bunks with Texan flags in a maximum-security hotel. I felt I was residing in a suburban neighborhood under house arrest as if the officials thought of us as dopers. I often heard tales of terrorists taking athletes hostage or planning to bomb the Villages. I was also anxious about rivals deliberately pissing on the floors or inserting thumbtacks in shoes, which would have led to a few participants being kicked out if that were true.

It was only two hours before I needed to sleep, thus I seized the opportunity to interact with some of the gentler athletes, including Carlos Gonzales, the bookish golfer, Vincente Alqueri the sensitive archer, and Frieda Trajando the party-loving field runner.

Those two hours were a hell of a time, learning about their quirks and hobbies. Carlos happened to be a big Tiger Woods fan and worked himself over many PGA tours yet is usually reserved, Vincente was raised in foster care because of his autism and often

displayed verbal tics such as repeating sentences, and Frieda was half deaf yet embraced jogging and socializing.

The day ended with sleeping in the lowly yet comfortable bunk while looking at the beautiful windows and the neatly decorated room. My home never looked so serene. The ceiling was always crooked, the paint on the walls was constantly peeling, and the bed was always bumpy. And if rain poured from the sky, I would lose a good night. The only thing comforting me was a figurine of Jesus Christ next to my bedpost. I would have done anything to stay in America.

Day One of the Olympics: After being awoken by an alarm clock that I could not afford in my home country, I was greeted with a warm, Texas-style breakfast: hash browns, tomatoes and eggplant, eggs, and orange juice in full delight. My morning meal back home was pupusa filled with beans and rice, but this is heaven to me. I want to wolf down if not for the fact I need to share, and it wasn't proper etiquette. Unfortunately, the first few days have not gone well for Team Puerto Rico

As I watched the television, I viewed the women's dodgeball team losing 11-4 against Quebec, boxer Ernesto Castro pulling an arm

muscle in the ring against an Italian heavyweight, and Vincente being blind sighted by the harsh and revolting sun. My new friend's loss was my loss, and it was devastating that all that training and trying to be the real-life William Tell came to nothing. Yet, I knew that my time at jockeying would be coming soon, and I was allowed permission to use the outfields to train. I would not make a fool out of myself on the day of the horse race.

Oh, Edelmira, she had been fed well but being away from her lifelong companion made her lax, too tired out of her mind.

I would not stand for that; I would stand for laziness. That was not what made me rise from poverty.

So, I pushed harder and harder, night after night after night, until she would become the next Secretariat.

That is what the Americans called him, right?

By Day Twelve, Team El Salvador had been rolling uphill with Hernando Vindeve scoring multiple points against a Dominican rival in discus throwing, the male tennis team

dominating Greenland’s, and Frieda, well, Frieda managed to achieve a gold medal despite her disability. Everyone was proud of her, including me, over the progress and surpassed expectations. We shared a celebratory feast that day. Unfortunately, the cook went on sick leave, so the meal was left uncooked until a replacement arrived, though the problem was minor compared to the criminal activity I noticed Sebastian take in: steroids.

By all accounts, it was illegal in the Olympics. Very few participants have cheated that way, and the extent it went to led to the banishment of the entire Russian team twenty years ago.

I remember waking up at 2:14 A.M. on the fourteenth day of the Olympics from a nightmare that involved me failing miserably and my tío scolding me and morphing into a flock of heckling crows. I was greeted by the caws of a vicious crow atop a windowsill, and I was compelled to look outside. I could see that jealous, egotistical swimmer being sold steroids at the Team Venezuela camp. How the security drones could not detect that was anyone's guess, but I noticed it was sold in an empty ketchup bottle.

The cheating bastard! I knew there was something suspicious about him.

The next day, I informed Coach Vargas of how Sebastian managed to trip the security, and he was kicked out for his dishonesty. The same could be said for Team Venezuela, who hacked the protocols in secret so the crime would not be detected. I heard no last words from him, except a glare that could kill and a scowl that could bite as he was being carried away. Bad times were signaled since Team El Salvador's swimming troupe was removed from the roster. I was the only one to feel an ounce of pity for the man who tried to resort to drugs to make himself stronger. Yes, Sebastian was a jerk and a cheater, yet he was still essential to the team like any other.

This blunder almost cast my chance at staying in the Olympics to the dumpster. In fact, it almost threw away everyone's chances with the IOC proposing harsher surveillance on drug use that almost passed unanimously.

Fortunately, the next few days were smooth sailing from there:

Taekwondo champion Jaime Quesada defeated a representative of Kurdistan.

· Dora Estevez performed an unrivaled ribbon dance.

Even the entire dodgeball team won by only a slim margin.

It was like Heaven as if Dios granted fortune to the underdog when he could have let the alpha influence fate. However, time had not yet come to predict victory accurately, not until Day Eighteen.

Yesterday, I called my tío on an Olympic team-registered phone for any updates, only to hear a croaking feminine voice off the other end. It was my abuela Anita. She usually visits for special occasions such as birthdays or anniversaries, but this was no celebration. For the first time since Abuelo Javier's death, she sounded grave.

“Mi nieto, your tío collapsed from a stroke just this morning.”

I held the phone in complete silence during the revelation. I know that my abuela is more knowledgeable in medicine than Tío has ever been, but I did not know how much longer he would live. The man who raised me from orphanhood might meet a lethal end not

by debt-collecting cartels or brutal police but by a simple disease.

To make things worse, Carlos suffered muscle spasms during one golf match and almost succumbed to cardiac arrest just after striking the ball into a pond. In the Village hospital, steroids were found in his blood, an overdose, if you will. I know he is not a junkie like Sebastian. I hung out with him almost every day of the Olympics, and he did not even drink. This had to be sabotage, and I skipped a day of training to learn the truth. When reached for comment, Carlos commented that he felt weird after drinking a refreshing cup of water to stave off the heat of outdoor golf. It may have been laced by one of those Venezuelan drug dealers, perhaps someone else working for Sebastian. The investigation never discovered the perpetrator, even though I knew the motive was revenge. If I ended Sebastian's career, he would end the career of one of my friends.

In anguish, Coach Vargas suddenly turned to me and told me about his son, who participated in the 2048 Olympics as a boxer only to lose his professional livelihood because doctors found steroids in his system. The tragedy began when he KOed his American opponent, almost beating him into submission

only to collapse from heart failure. Vargas unveiled a picture from his pocket, the last picture of his son before he left him in disgrace.

I asked him, “Why are you telling this to me, specifically?” only for the coach to answer, “I realize you care so much about Carlos. I have seen you talk with him so much like friends. Your pain must, therefore, be mine.”

Suddenly, Vargas began to cry, and I gave my empathy to the coach, but I was focused on the upcoming race.

Day Nineteen started like every day: I woke up, showered, dressed, and ate a Texan-style breakfast. Things would soon be different, however. Edelmira and I were escorted out of the Olympic Village while the coach and the rest of the team promised good luck. This was the eye of the hurricane. This was the time to ask: *Will I succeed or will I fail? What will be my legacy?*

As I entered the Sam Houston Race Park, the lights on the field blinked orange, vendors sold Pepsi and hot dogs, and the billboards advertised car brands that I could care less about. Here I was amidst the

greenery, the stables, and the hurdles feeding carrots to Edelmira to relieve her anxiety. Equipped with me was a half-full canteen to keep me quenched and lotion to prepare for the harsh, beating sun. I also wore wearing a tight-fit jockey outfit with blue boots and jacket and a shirt, helmet, and gloves dipped in white. At the same time, my old friend Hector smirked with pride as he showed off his beautiful Lanza to the crowd as if it were a pageant.

"Ready for the real race?" he sarcastically asked.

The answer was obvious.

Then the referee announced the countdown, and thoughts were racing through my mind.

Five…This is it—the chance to make my Olympic dreams come true.

Four…What if all my hard work turned into pudding like a spoiled plantain?

Three…Confession time: It took me sixteen tries to successfully ride on Edelmira without being flipped off.

Two…I will not let people mock me for my stature. I cannot let verbal venom get to me.

One…Vamanos!

By the time the digital timer called for takeoff, the reins tightened, the nostrils snorted loud, her hooves clopped incessantly in one place, and my horse’s eyes were pierced at the goal. I rode around the pastures like my own uncle's farm, though the track was much longer than any I encountered in El Salvador. Edelmira jumped over the hurdles to near perfection, no matter how much dirt, sweat, and blood eked from her body. She neighed with all her senses, as I was. The sights and the sounds swirled through my mind like a tornado.

I won the first round, completing the course faster than Hector, though we complimented each other like friends, not opponents. I led a winning streak for the next two rounds, one for trick rides and another for displaying my horse's obedience, attitude, and physical vigor. No doubt that despite Edelmira's unassuming physique, she would accomplish the round in flying colors. Then came the final round: the team races.

The world came ill-prepared. No country realized the IOC restored the four-horse racing event. Thankfully, three participants lurched forward from defeated countries: Vas Hondo of Bolivia, Alicia Secunde of the newly independent island of Puerto Rico, and my friend, once again representing Panama. We defined four nations of impoverished origins, cooperating in a unique position that had never been applied in the history of the Games. Many coaches and politicians jeered and tried to boycott the event for “national treachery” and “perverse inclusiveness”, yet the committee allowed this action to stay.

As the sun sank into the earth and the sky glowed bluer, I once again stroked my horse's head and whispered in her ear, *“Eres rapida.”*

I was head-to-head with Hector, galloping and galloping, this time directly with tension. He promised that, in this race, he was not going to lose. My lungs were short on-air, my uniform covered in dust and grime, and Edelmira's eyes watering. It was turn, gallop, accelerate, turn, gallop. Suddenly, my horse slipped on mud, and I skidded from the finish line, with pain in my back and even more grime on my uniform. A minute later and Hector would have surpassed me at the finish

line. But as if by a miracle, as I got up and kept telling Edelmira “¡Levantarse!”, she slowly stood back on her feet to the surprise of the judges. I had a second chance to win, and we crossed the finish line – by a second.

By a second.

One second of delay, and I would have been in second place.

Thank you, Dios.

The entire audience stood in shock over my surprise victory before suddenly applauding. To think that a scrawny farm boy with barely any proper education and a feeble, noodle-limbed horse could surpass even the greatest of professional equestrians; that was a dream never thought possible. I was shedding tears of joy when I received a gold medal and stood on the highest point of the podium. Hector even came to congratulate me.

“I guess you really are better than me, El Ratoncito.”

My humble character blushed at that remark, as I knew it was merely luck that allowed me to surpass him. As such, I

congratulated him on his efforts, and we shook hands vigorously.

If Tío could afford a television, he would be crying too, but as of now, he could only hear about me from sports news on the radio.

The night of my win was festive. A new cook occupied the kitchen and delivered steaming hot plates of Salvadoran cuisine. Despite how many on the team despised me, they lauded my achievements and called me “El Ratoncito”, only the second time the name was not used as a slur. They treated me like I was the poster boy of El Salvador, the symbol of all that s good about my beloved country. Frieda, Vicente, and a recovered Carlos especially embraced me for stepping up to the plate and proving that the meek and small can overcome the great and mighty.

Afterward, the coach delivered a letter from my abuela saying how proud she was of me, how my tío was proud of me. Despite how I disregarded his orders and partook in the Olympics, it did not matter to him. That was it for the night, and the closing ceremony discussed peace, unity, and diversity.

As I flew the plane trip back to El Salvador, I thought about the experience Edelmira and I had. No matter how many mistakes we make, our successes emboldened us to prepare for the Olympics. All I could say to the Houston Games was, “¡Muchas gracias!” We may not be the strongest or the fastest or the most agile, but we have an inner strength that other horses and other men lack: heart, passion, and spirit.

Tío, I am coming home.

Tale of a Judenrat

Traitor. Double-crosser. Snitch. Rat. German.

These were just some of many insults I heard in my head after the terrible war, after the slaughter of millions of innocents. Every day, I dreamed that mothers would scowl and bark threats, children would kick me in the shins, and fathers would pelt food and rocks in my direction; they had every reason to inflict those actions against my body and soul. I was once a Judenrat, a member of the Jewish secret police who collaborated with the Nazis

by sorting my fellows into cattle cars and leading them to their deaths.

How could I not be punished, whether by verbal abuse or physical assault, for such an abominable crime against the human race?

In justification, I was committing all those unspeakable acts for my family, the family which the Schutzstaffel threatened to destroy if I did not obey whatever sadistic order they conducted. Alas, my motives did not matter during the Holocaust, and they did not matter afterward.

I am still shamed decades later, at the age of one-hundred-six, even when few survivors of the Holocaust remain on this earth. Eyes avert from my direction, feet tread in the opposite direction, and warnings of “You will never be considered a Jew!” and “Get out of here, Nazi!” are whispered behind my back. Unlike Oskar Schindler, the ex-Nazi businessman who died a hero to Jews everywhere, I fear I am to be entombed a monster, no matter how many years I spent making up for my sins.

I was not always like that. I admit the first twenty years were the happiest in my life,

a time when I lived not as a criminal but as an ordinary man.

My name is Janny Noraikaslaw, and I was born on June 23, 1919, seven months after Poland gained independence. My father was a Conservative Jewish designer of suits who preferred Polish over Yiddish but still tried to teach me about Shabbat and the Holy Days.

And my mother?

She was a sweet-hearted maid and housekeeper who went along with traditions despite hailing from a Catholic family. The lack of a matrilineal lineage meant I was not a Jew in the community's eyes. Thus, I was never accepted into Hebrew school nor invited to a synagogue. At the same time, the Jewish blood from my father forbade me from being permitted to public schools. My parents homeschooled me, and, without friends, I began to hate my racial identity to the point of later discarding my father's surname and adopting my mother's maiden name.

At age fourteen, I worked in a steel factory and met Zofia, the daughter of my boss and the apple of my eye. She had beautiful black bangs, cherry-tinted cheeks, and milky

skin like Snow White. I would only be permitted to date her if I did one thing: perform the most proficient work out of any employee for the entire season.

Bartek, my boss, was not antisemitic, but he was intolerant of laziness and sloppiness as any manager should. It was his relentless work ethic and the desire to share my love with Zofia that compelled me to challenge my body, no matter the pay cuts, the loss of bonuses, or even the temporary numbing of nerves in my hands.

Two years later, my efforts bore fruit, and my first date developed into an engagement in five months and marriage three months afterward. Zofia was the perfect woman for me. With her beautiful face, angelic voice, and raw intelligence, she brought colorful dinner conversations about cultural science, a subject Zofia considered a first love to her. Besides, she inherited enough money to buy my family security. Sure, I was five years her junior, and I carried Jewish genes, but my beloved did not care. After all, she claimed her mother's cousin was Jewish. While Zofia'' parents were reluctant to approve of the civil union, mine were not, and we lived three prosperous years in the same house. Soon, she bore a son named Arek and we decided to

disregard any religious customs for the sake of stability. No one else in the Jewish or Polish community accepted my wife or my son, and I ignored their prejudices as long as we were left alone.

Alas, the Germans came on September 1, 1939, and turned everything upside down with their swastikas and goose-stepping. We read about Hitler's aggressive policies in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. His next target to make a meal out of was our home, just because Poland was full of Slavs and Jews.

Alas, my parents were so passionate about the land that they wanted to die on Polish soil rather than in foreign territory. I also believed that moving to the USSR or any other place in Eastern Europe was no less of a death sentence; every single country around us was under the reigns of iron-fisted dictators and kings who hated Jews and were glad to help the Third Reich. If only I had used my brain and flown my wife and son to America instead of thinking with my heart and staying with my parents.

By the next day, German tanks were rolling on the streets of Warsaw, and we hid in an underground bunker while only taking as

much from our houses as we could. Charred tanks and bloodied corpses diluted our hope that the army would soon dog off the invaders. Several other refugees, mainly Jews, lived inside, relying on rations, spare clothing, and blankets. Even as the basement space was cluttered, the floor and walls were caked in filth, the darkness only allowed a sliver of light, and the sick coughed into each other's skin, we felt safe as long as we did not make any physical contact with the feeble or the diseased. At one time, when my father accepted food from a woman who had extra, I frustratedly batted his hand.

“Do you realize what germs she might be carrying, Tata?” I coldly informed him.

Another time, I tried to shut up a baby’s crying in its mother's arms, threatening to swaddle it to death. Outside observers may cry out, “How could you?”, but from my perspective at the time, my cruelty was intelligent; it was necessary. It was what kept all of us alive – at least for the moment.

And I made even more of an uncompassionate move twenty days later when I opened up the bunker to German troops. I could already hear them stomping and cocking their rifles from above. They

would eventually discover the bunker anyway, and the constant praying and candlelight flickering only hastened the inevitable.

What I did, I would carry in my soul for the rest of eternity.

I enthusiastically declared I was not a Jew, my family were not Jews, and I was held hostage by Jewish thieves. I sold out forty-five hidden strangers because their lives were deemed less important than my own. My parents and wife, cradling our son, were shocked by my blunt selfishness. I could sense the feeling of betrayal lurking in their eyes. Unfortunately, while the commander of the Jewish-hunting group admired me for ratting out the bunker's occupants, he brusquely told me that I was not telling the truth, unveiling a paper from his fingertips.

In my shock, I remembered leaving my passport in the house, which denoted my name, occupation, and picture.

The rest of the passports were safe with my family, but it was too late. The commander reported to me - with a sly smile - that the assets of my father’s clothing store were seized and transferred to an Aryan bookshop,

our houses were ransacked and depleted of everything valuable to us, and we were all sentenced to Stutthof, a concentration camp in Danzig and the only one in Poland at the time.

As for my grandparents and other relatives?

They were probably already there. However, with his bristled facial hair, gleaming spectacles, and razor-thin deceptive smile, the commander offered me an important position as a “deserving reward” for exposing a large section of Jewish stragglers on my own accord.

“You would do well as part of the Judenrat,” the commander urged with the civility of a buck and the heart of a savage wolf. “We need men with clever minds like yours to help us scout for hidden Jews and deport them.”

My initial response was a polite no, arguing not only that I was not a Jew, but even if I were, I would not involve myself in any deportation. The commander grinned, laughed even, because, in his eyes, the origin of my Jewish blood did not matter.

“A Jew is a Jew, no matter if he is one-half or one-ninth!” he barked in German, while waving to his translator.

There were many of our countrymen who were indifferent to, supported, even collaborated with the Nazis for the sake of satisfying their hatred of Jews. To hear in my old age, a young sap named Andrzej Duda passed a bill decrying criticism of Polish complicity in the Holocaust almost broke my heart and induced my blood to nearly boil at one o=point.

But that’s not what the story is about. It’s about how the commander coerced me into joining his treacherous council by threatening to send my parents, wife, and son to be shot one by one like a pack of sardines. And to demonstrate he was not bluffing, an elderly woman - the same woman who lent some of her rations to my father - was brought forth by soldiers and instantly blasted in the head without hesitance. It was as if he thought of the decrepit, sickly crone begging for her life, not as a person but an irksome pest to be exterminated. Alas, he played with me like a harp as I reluctantly accepted his offer to be one of the founding members of the Polish Judenrat.

My wife, mother, and father had a range of reactions to my surrender, from disappointment to anger to horror, as they were carried off, cattle car and all, to the concentration camp. Indeed, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, and my cousins, who had already been taken weeks beforehand, would share their shame for my act of cowardice. But, in my youth, it was not cowardice that drove my actions; it was love for my family. I did not care that their minds suddenly twisted against me, nor did I care that my punishment would be extreme damnation in the eyes of G-d. They would remain alive as long as I sacrificed the lives of strangers.

For three and a half years, I participated in a reign of terror in war-stricken Poland, spying for the Germans by pretending to be a refugee desperate for safe haven, only to lure other refugees into an ambush. Other times, I tricked other Jews into thinking that the boxcars would lead them out of Poland and into Lithuania, the USSR, or an unoccupied part of the country. Whatever deceptive assignment I was tasked with, I hated it with every bone in my body.

It was not just the inhumane orders themselves, which felt about as abusive as tricking a bear into a melon-spiked trap. It was

the poor pay, the unpleasant bureaucracy, the feeling that strings were hoisting me. Not to mention, the vulgar abuses, the revulsive pranks, and mockery. Most of my service was paid in raisins, nuts, and sesame seeds - pitiful excuses for edibles.

But one time, I was paid a hundred zlotych only to realize they were worthless, expunged by the General Government. I would have beaten that piece of shit for humiliating me every day and every week and every month had my family's lives not been at stake.

It didn’t help that I was forced to surrender my wedding ring so it could be confiscated by the Nazis and smelted down. Three years of our symbolic bond for nothing.

As a Judenrat, I was forced to wear a close-fitting suit with a yellow armband emblazoned with the Star of David, similar to the disturbing blackshirts of the SS. The council made up of twenty-five Jews, most coerced like me, while at least a fifth were ashamed of their heritage and more than happy to help round up the “mongrels”, “dogs”, “undesirables”, what other venomous words they spewed from their mouths.

The most infamous was the pus-faced leader Konstantyn Wladisliecz, who I knew years before as Lew Sovenski; he changed his name to sound more “Aryan”. His voice now was like chalk smeared on blood, and his face resembled death. Every session, he praised the Nazi propaganda machine and scolded Jews who tried to hide their existence from the “master race”. As much as I hated his moronic babbling, his fascist sympathies, and his race-baiting rhetoric, I had more in common with him than I ever personally admitted before.

For the most part, being a Judenrat meant that my family would be spared execution for as long as I remained firm and loyal. Partially, though, I also wanted revenge against the Jewish community for shunning me and my “half-breed” status. I was that self-hating Jew who lost faith in G-d and religion and lacked a twinkle in my eye when the destitute were marched by rifle-carrying blackshirts, never to be seen again. Even my only friend Karl Lithgow, a heavyset Austrian who moved to Poland and was also shunned by the Jewish community, was shocked I could ever be so ruthless.

I estimated that, in three years, I helped the authorities capture over two thousand Jews, making me one of the most efficient

members of the Judenrat. Still, I never received respect from the Germans and Poles as I hoped. They still treated me like an outsider to bait other outsiders.

By the fall of 1942, my duties were moved to the Warsaw Ghetto, where I would keep records of every Jewish inmate, minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day. The work was more tedious than when I was employed at the factory. From what I saw, it was razed from the German bombings. No word was confirmed about my father-in-law's fate, whether he perished in the bombing or survived and was apprehended by the Nazis. I never got to talk to Zofia about his whereabouts during our time at the bunker. I figured her mind was already troubled with dark visions; any disappointing news on her father's arrest would have led to a meltdown. Unfortunately, it was too late as, once I encountered her at the barbed gate of the ghetto, she immediately vented her frustrations on me.

"How could you do such a thing to Poland? To the Jews? To your own family?!"

I requested that my close family be transported there on the assumption that it was not only safer than a brutal labor camp,

but I would have confirmation that, after three years, they were not smoldering corpses. The time was ripe for the Final Solution to be implemented, and there were reports of Treblinka, Auschwitz, and Birkenau, among other concentration camps that I lured refugees into, being liquidated.

My dear Zofia revealed herself, her hair ragged, her body emaciated, and a golden star lapeled to her sagging right breast. Then came my father, who looked even more like a skeleton, a half-blind face from beatings and beard discarded with a butcher's knife to prevent guards from continually pulling it. They informed me that my mother and paternal grandparents contracted endemic syphilis while my maternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins had perished in the other concentration camps. And when I asked why Arek was not with them, my wife coolly informed me that the boy was infected with typhoid before his fifth birthday and succumbed to the disease four days later, asking when his father would return. I froze in fear of the revelation and tried sincerely to apologize for not contacting my family at all, but all I was left with was a crude scowl, icy eyes, and tense palms.

They did not recognize me anymore, or at least they did not WANT to.

The explanation no longer mattered.

The justifications were empty, the apologies invalid.

I had already lost my family by cowering to the enemy. Still, while I did dance over the notion of betraying the council and the SS, even dreaming about the possibility, I nevertheless continued to apply my accounting skills, writing the name, occupation, and location of every ghetto resident so the Nazis would dispel escape and monitor every threat of rebellion. Unpredictably, the uprising came down in full force.

I remember it well, seventy-eight years to this day, when the resettlement commenced, the SS announced that the ghetto would be liquidated and set up one final Judenrat meeting; they ordered us to deport seven thousand Jews each day on the lie that the victims would be resettled to the East, though the elderly were left behind to die. I did not know at the time that the “resettlements” were not labor camps; they were permanent trips to Treblinka. The only

ones who rebelled were my wife and my father. They secretly stole cyanide pills and laced them into my ill relatives' medicine so they wouldn't live to be riddled with bullets. I only found this information after I revisited the former ghetto years later. My task was to help seize and line up civilians for the deportation process, equipped with a baton if some were too rebellious.

Alas, that plan crumpled like babka by the start of 1943. Rocks and petrol bombs were tossed from windowsills, artillery guns were mounted on walls, and snipers were seen from rooftops. There was no doubt in my mind that the Jews were conducting armed resistance against those who would turn them into sheep ready for the slaughterhouses. It was not like any other revolution I had heard about from bragging officers; it was not a short-lived, one-sided massacre but an outright battle that lasted five months and took the toll of almost a hundred Nazis and Judenrat.

Everywhere I went, I had to dodge the gunfire, I had to evade the explosions, I had to step over the bleeding or burnt corpses of both friend and foe. One of them was Konstantyn, whose eyes were gouged out and his mouth

grasping a wine bottle as if to demonstrate the deserved punishment of all traitors.

Good riddance, I thought as I spat at his corpse.

Another was Lithgow. From his chin wound, I deduced he found an abandoned pistol and shot himself – as to say he would rather end his own life than attack an innocent. My veins ran cold over his death, especially from the nervous breakdown that had been built up for months. But I had no time to mourn, only to find my family. It took until the end of the uprising when the German tanks decimated the last of the offenses, the last of the bunkers were smoked out, and the last of the buildings were caked in flames to reunite with them. By that point, I had beaten down six rebels in hiding and was grazed in the left shoulder, even almost breaking a rib by that point.

Finally, I found Zofia and Tata – in death. When the apartment they resided in collapsed, when the smoke-filled their lungs and exhausted all oxygen, that was when I truly lost them. Even as I ran, my eyes tearful from the chemicals, crouching from the noxious gas, I was too late to save them. My loved ones, friends, and relatives all departed from my life

this year, and all I had to respond with was weeping. Hours and hours of weeping, kneeling to the ground, letting my tears ebb through my sooty cheeks, cradling their blackened corpses.

Soon, I was interrupted by barking, not of any German's dog but the new SS Grupenführer, hired by high command after the failure of the previous one. In the center of the city square, when the sky was painted grey and thousands of captive insurgents were marched to the cattle cars at gunpoint, I was harshly reprimanded for wasting my time mourning “idiot Jews who killed themselves for so-called freedom”.

Indeed, I remembered him saying that like it was yesterday.

Then came the punch to the spleen: Since the camps and the uprising had destroyed my entire family, I was to be relieved, my work no longer in use. I would share the fate of my son, mother, uncles, aunts, cousins, and paternal grandparents: Either labor to death like an abused donkey, fall victim to infectious disease, suffocate in a cyanide-filled shower room or be shot like a dog. The opportunity to jab those G-dforsaken

Nazis until they knew what pain felt like was finally open to me.

Punch!

I managed to make the commander gush blood from his nose with the most satisfaction I had since my son's birth. It did not matter that the Ghetto Police subdued me. It did not matter that the batons paralyzed my stomach and legs. I was finally able to vent my frustrations for at least a few seconds.

Afterward, my limp body was pushed onto the cattle train transporting, not to Treblinka, like I thought, but to Auschwitz, one of the deadliest concentration camps. In only a few seconds of consciousness, I remembered looking at the scowls of Jews who did not want to share the same boxcar as me, and then the frowns of those not on the train. It was as though they would never miss me, that being dead and forgotten would be a positive wish towards me.

The next time I woke up was the beginning of a year in hell. I was now just like the innocent captives I once arrested with head shaved, numbers tattooed, and wearing a pinstripe shirt. I was at the peril of SS guards

and Polish collaborators. More than that, I was at risk of the inmates who casually sabotaged my forced task of building defenses, spat on my face and stole my meager rations, and aimed their feet and fists whenever there was a place the guards would not care to turn around and see. I let them shove me into that fly-infested, disease-carrying, muddy ground as I felt responsible for their fates.

By the time the Soviets arrived and liberated Auschwitz, I was a trembling shadow of the man I used to be, my mind fractured by the pain and guilt that haunted me every day. The ghosts I brought forth by my actions mocked me. Some would have called me lucky that I survived the Nazi invasion of Poland, the Warsaw Uprising, and the Holocaust, but in essence, the only thing that survived was my life.

In the months after the war, I wandered, looking for some way to redeem myself. I left Poland, the entire East actually, due to the corrupt Sovietism that was in place. The only place I could belong was in America, the land of opportunity and new lives.

It took me decades to heal my mind.

Decades of charity work.

Decades of repentance.

At first, I tried to visit any Holocaust survivors who made their new home in the Free World to apologize for my misdeeds and explain what caused me to become a Judenrat. But every time I knocked on a door, rang the doorbell, or attended their speeches at universities and synagogues, I was ignored, sometimes shunned, sometimes pushed out like a burglar. None of the survivors wanted eye contact, let alone conversation with me. They thought I was a selfish monster who should leave them alone. I innocently assumed that, over time, when more and more survivors perished from this earth, my reputation might not necessarily be forgotten but softened. Alas, I underestimated the power of deeds, the horror stories that my peers told to their children, to their grandchildren about the dreaded, treacherous Judenrat.

Eventually, I decided to hide my past and pretend that the numbers on my arm merely identified me as a Holocaust survivor, nothing more. I also avoided visiting any museums and memorials that reminded me of my former deeds. However, unlike others, I

did not forge a new name, even if I felt ashamed of mine.

If not for the ghosts of my victims telling me I had to put in the hard work to be redeemed, I would've jumped off a roof or bought a gun to blast it at my temple. I was sorely tempted to end my suffering many times.

I was also tempted to forget the tragedy, to purge my mind of those terrible memories and pretend I played no part in the Holocaust. Nothing worked, not pills, not placebos, not making new friends with others who didn't know my past. I even tried to forge a new romance with a woman named Natalie Correnza whose swarthy skin and interest in the fine arts differed her from Zofia., However, our first night of sex reminded me too much of her.

I realized the only way to make peace with my past was to return to Poland and visit the former concentration camps there. I participated in a tour to Auschwitz, which listed the names of every miserable soul who died there.

One name struck me as identifiable: Bartek Mynavski. Born: March 21, 1891. Died November 3, 1940.

That was the name of my dearest Zofia's father. From the preserved records, it seemed like his crimes against Hitler were not relegated to secretly hiring Jews into his factories but also supplying equipment to the Polish Home Army. If only I were as brave and decent as him when I knelt and passed a stone over the name.

This happened in 1990, coincidentally on the 50th anniversary of his death. It was also the year I was allowed to return to a free post-Communist Poland. Then, I decided to visit the Ludhof camp where my son and mother died. Again, I wept.

Then I visited the Warsaw Memorial dedicated to those who sacrificed their lives in the uprising, including my wife and father. My weeping was more pronounced than any time before.

Every year, it would be a tradition that I would visit their graves and ask G-d on high to forgive my grievous sins. Alas, I'm not sure

every apology in my lifetime would make up for what I did in those three years.

For the past thirty years, I have been a congregant at Temple Beth Israel in Robertson, New York, a synagogue whose clergy realize the past is the past. Despite my earlier lack of faith in the Lord, the Poland tour prompted me to consider embracing my Jewish heritage in hopes could bring me closer to the people I once hurt and prove I was a Jew, despite my lack of matrilineal lineage. Thankfully, they didn't mind, even setting up a self-help group of former abettors of war crimes to help deal with our issues.

Longer than that, I have been a social worker, delivering free food and hygienic supplies to the poor to bring goodness back to the world.

But, since yesterday, I am on my death bed, a victim of terminal lung cancer. My clock is ticking down, and no one but a rabbi stands beside me. He's there not just to deliver my last rites but to listen to my story.

After finishing, I heard Rabbi Arnold Fleshing state, "What you committed during the war was horrible, even if the reason was

relatable, but you haven't been that person since you arrived in this beautiful country. The Lord absolves all sinners who put the hard work to repent their actions."

Those words put a smile on my face. Even if most will not recognize my achievements, they have made a lasting impact that has affected hundreds, perhaps thousands who needed my help.

As the light in my eyes darken and I imagine my loved ones watching over me, I have one last thought on my mind:

"Elohim, please grant me access to Heaven. Angels, please absolve me of wrongdoing. Mortals everywhere, please do not write me off as a monster; I have done my part and await reunification with my family."

A Black WWI Veteran's Veterans Day

1918: On the eleventh month of the eleventh day of the eleventh hour, the Great War collapsed on its heels, all hostilities ceased in Europe, empires crumbled, and new states were created. And yet, no significant change happened to the Negro in America, still chained by the bonds of virtual slavery, hate, poverty, and violence.

Flash forward fifty years later: The land of the free is flush with parades, balloons, and speeches about the golden jubilee of the armistice despite the waves of political violence that had torn up the streets of every big city from coast to coast just months beforehand. And the life of the Negro? Well, it improved thanks to the glorious actions of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

At the age of seventy-seven, I’m able to drink from the public water fountain, able to be catered at a public diner, able to take a front row bus seat like my white comrades. Fifty years ago, such rights would've been impossible in America. Today, I’m proudly wheelchair-bound on the podium as President Lyndon B. Johnson honors me and other veterans for fighting our whole damn lives for everybody else’s freedom. Fifty years ago, I would've been banned from joining the crowd of pasty white folks in their gowns and jackets and bowlers. Today, my grandson is entrenched in the wild jungles of Vietnam, not just with men of his own skin color but of brown and red and yellow and white. Fifty years ago, I would’ve been segregated from all contact with Caucasian troops except for racist officers who barked curt, useless orders left and right.

That is why, by November 11, 1918, when all the blood stopped spilling, when all the bodies stopped dropping, when all the helmets and rifles were thrown in the dirt-coated, smoggy air, I wasn’t cooperating with the prejudiced U.S. Army; instead, I served under the Canadians.

Why, you ask, was I honored in America if not an American veteran? Because not only did I exit West Point as a graduate but also a volunteer for most of the war.

It was completely legal to enlist in another army if you desired the benefit of higher pay and lack of a color barrier. Plus, your citizenship wouldn’t be invalidated by living in another country. That didn't mean the transition was easy. No, it was slower than if I had decided to stay with Uncle Sam's fighting forces. My name, my date of birth, every single component of my temporal stay had to be inspected to see if I was viable for transfer. Despite succeeding, I was looked down on by officers and regulars alike for my background.

How could a Black twenty-four-year-old Yankee from Skokie, Illinois with absolutely no history of armed relatives think he’s skilled enough to join the Canadian Corps?

There were very few Negroes in the armed forces and even fewer foreigners, so it made sense for me to be held in suspicion. I could hold a bayonet well, and I was a decent runner at college track-and-field, but there were allegations that my loyalties lied not to any person or contingent or country but to money. Yes, they believed I was a self-serving mercenary, and that lie served its purpose from the brisk fall of 1915 to the winter of 1916, enough time to gain respect from my comrades. Otherwise, my slop and gruel were equal to anybody else's. Nobody refused me the right to sleep in linen nor the right to dine, converse, and slumber with white soldiers. I was even paid twenty Canadian dollars each month, lower than what the majority of troops made yet higher than what the U.S. Army would pay me.

However, my parents protested the decision, fearing not just accusations of disloyalty but that I would die before my time, on foreign soil. I could only answer them through farewell hugs that I needed to do this.

Immediately, I at least made one friend, a white machine gunner by the name of Jonathan Salt. Just like me, he was of foreign origin, hailing from the British controlled island of Trinidad. Not only was his wife Black

but his prejudice was only aimed at the Turks who humiliated him in Gallipoli and led him to be discharged from the British Army due to his trauma. We spent the first few months talking about our lives back home and what we were striving for.

By the time the Canadian Corps saw its first action behind enemy lines, though, the rest had grown accustomed to my presence. We were struggling against the merciless hands of nature, with blistering cold and infectious disease on the man-made trenches of France, but man's own wrath proved to be an additional obstacle. We would have to transcend all debates of race and nationality if we were to survive the next two years in No Man's Land. Mercy, however, was not to be discarded.

Despite no partaking in the heartwarming Christmas Truce that I heard swept thousands of troops in a misty awe of peace, we did our best to only engage enemy lines deemed necessary; only when yellow mustard bombs were tossed in the trenches like potatoes, only when snipers were placed to snap off the heads of those poking too recklessly out of safety, only when mines sought to bury us in mortar did we strike back. I knew that many Germans were fighting only

for the same reason as my comrades: survival. In fact, through those three years, the regiment I served lost more lives to infection and landmines than to artillery and bombs. But we also saved many lives in the villages occupied by German forces even if my complexion was not rewarded with gratitude.

August 8, 1918: It was the launch date of the Hundred Days Offensive, the last great campaign for the Allies. My relationship with the rest of the Allies evolved from mutual respect to that of deep embrace as I was also promoted from private to sergeant. And my face, once occupied by a stubbly colony, eventually grew into a dark bed of hair. Shaving was of little concern to me as the Gillette safety razors imported across the sea were malfunctional and only managed to etch bloody sores on my cheeks. But one little cut was nothing compared to an agonizing amputation of my lower right leg, sawed-off from getting mangled on barbed wire in Ypres.

Today, such a wound would only receive stitches or a cast, but, during the Great War, a bleeding limb was most likely considered a useless load on the body. Even without the miracles of modern medicine, the army surgeon conducted his operations with precision, finely severing tissue without

removing too much blood and applying anesthetic fluid to my wound. The operation still took hours to accomplish, and the pain was so unbearable that I imagined pulling a pistol against my head and blowing my damn brains out. Yet I recovered and decided that a stub would not deter me from resuming the fight; not even the urgings of my superior convinced me to retire. I wanted to experience this war through the end.

Why not a prosthetic limb? Too expensive.

I managed to carry on very much without it thanks to one little secret: will. An aspect that the psychologically damaged could not understand, a quality that required perseverance, bravery, and honesty. My mind was gradually scarred with trauma and regret after the war, but others were more immediate. Some vomited in the mud every time they were pressured to lob grenades at enemy troops. One limbered around mindlessly praying to Jesus and Mary and King George with almost blind negligence to what was around him. Unfortunately, my friend had the worst of it all.

For most of our time together, he was only plagued by Turks filling him with holes in his nightmares, but on the last day of his life,

the multitude of corpses increasing and wounded, crying out for their mothers only triggered his insanity. In Salt’s mind, the Turks were already on the Western Front, and as they existed both as friend and foe. I couldn't tell you how many troops that I fought side by side never made it out of the trenches in one piece, but I could tell you that fourteen were victims of his broken mind. And that was before he removed his pepper-spraying machine gun, stole my M1911, and cocked it to his chin in a quick, unstoppable flash. My memories are forever haunted by his suicide, his lifeless eyes wild with regret, his body twitching for nine seconds before going limp. I tried to stop both actions, but I was too shocked over the horror.

October 10th proved that, despite advancing over the Germans and being less than a month from total conquest, our regiment had lost the battle of numbers and morale. The only way to move forward? Drape Salt’s corpse in the Red Ensign and bury him under the ground. Even with his terrible actions, he deserved not to be left in an undignified manner.

However, we still had to march to the endpoint of the war: Chaumont-devant-Damvillers.

For the next month, as countless more lives were extinguished, even as ammunition was fired, even as more landmines erupted in the black soil, we persisted in moving on, with me constantly hobbling on my crutches. I didn’t experience much action thanks to my disability, though that didn’t matter.

November 11th: The end of a perilous journey. We reached the sight where two German machine gunners patrolled the small French town and engaged with an American by the name of Henry Gunther. Hours went by with only the thought of overwhelming the artillery before the other shoe would drop, foreheads creating beads of sweat, eyes shooting like daggers. It was too late. The last man to die in the Great War was silenced merely a minute before Armistice was declared.

How ironic.

The murderers soon surrendered their arms, and we were permitted to dig twenty feet in the rich soil and bury our comrades who perished that day while the Americans were permitted to consecrate theirs. Unlike earlier encounters, no one cast the evil eye at me since they knew explicit bigotry was

secondary to paying respects. It wasn't long before Lieutenant Edwin Foces ordered the rest of the regiment to sing “O Canada”, share our last camp meal, and head for Ottawa for military decorations. Most of us were not as much joyous as starved and exhausted, disturbed by three years of black sky, lethal machines, and unrivaled brutality. But at least I was handsomely rewarded for the amount of service as a foreign volunteer.

In America, I wouldn’t have received a medal, nor would’ve my pay grade been adequate, but neither France nor Canada cared for your skin color as long as you fought as humanity’s servant. The dozens of volunteers from America, Canada, and the African colonies awarded stars, emblems, and garters by white friendly hands further proved that. It was time to return to the land of my forefathers, but it did not have to be.

Why live in America where the racist status quo remained furled, and any recognition for a Negro on the front lines would be completely ignored once he returned to civilian life?

There was no home for me there. Uncle Sam didn’t welcome me, at least until the time came for both parties to be at each other’s

embrace. Instead, once I returned to America, I used the money earned during to war to buy a visa and immigrate to Canada. It was painful to leave my parents and grandparents behind, but I knew they would want what was best for me. Canada wasn't a perfect haven for racial tolerance, but my new country was undoubtedly more prosperous than down south: fewer lynchings, less segregation, jobs that I could make a living off of even if veteran benefits did not apply to Black foreign volunteers. For the most part, construction was the least restrictive of all available jobs, and I had been happily working in the industry for over thirty-five years on the cheap.

The terrible ingratitude Negro soldiers received and the race riots that occurred in the summers of 1919 and 1920? Didn't happen in Ottawa.

The ominous Red Scare? Rarely implemented in Ottawa.

Labor union strikes? Definitely happened in Ottawa, though I never partook in them.

My satisfaction with building skyscrapers or repairing homes was peak. Sure, I was restricted to a wheelchair and my wages were not equal to that of a white man, but I felt happier than I ever did in

Philadelphia or Boston or Atlanta or any other damn place in America. *Besides*, I thought, *what would be the consequences of joining whatever job I saw fit? Nothing less than the breaking of an already broken body, incapable of even tooling the strong, useful hands the Almighty bestowed upon me.* I could deal with the racist gawking of co-workers and bystanders or unfair cuts by an employer as long as I still held a job and was not threatened by violence.

Unfortunately, the Great Depression had tumbled over to the north and my construction job was immediately at risk. Had it not been for my marriage to Lois Tellinger, one of the wealthiest residents in Ontario's Negro community, my financial troubles would have thrown me into poverty. Of course, I love my darling wife for more than just her money. Lois was a beauty, a charmer, a philanthropist, a supporter of the Black Canadian way of life; best of all, she bore no prejudice against Yankees.

The first time I met her was at a gala for Negro veterans in 1923, and her vibrant personality and honorable activism were what sparked my interest. Two years later, we were married in the very same gala, and later that same year, brought a boy into the world. If it

happened years earlier, my handicap may have forbidden me from experiencing the consummate act of sex. However, her wealth allowed me to afford an artificial leg made from iron. It’s funny to see such an invention becoming a commodity now when it was so alien in my youth that I considered it science fiction. Anyways, we christened our new, plump son Jonathan, in honor of my fallen comrade.

Throughout his childhood, in the burdensome years of the Depression, I entertained him with stories from my time in the Canadian Corps. My wife always tried to discourage my table-time tales, whether it was because he was too young for them or that they might reopen psychological sores in me or that war should not be glamorized; however, none worked. Jonathan grew up with a sense of duty, with the realization that, in Canada, fighting for your country meant another step to ending systemic racism.

As for reopening old wounds? They reopened on their own like a sealed bag left on a windy day. It didn't take war stories to hallucinate a fallen comrade, bloody and confused, standing in the kitchen. It didn't need word of mouth for me to hallucinate another, taking a tragic leap of faith from a

construction beam. The prescriptions never fully erased my trauma, and they might be a part of me ‘til the day I die. But my new job as a window cleaner eased my stress, and I was glad to see not only my son becoming an honorable member of the armed forces but making it out of the Second World War alive. Hell, life for the Negro in Canada improved ten years after the war.

Where once Lois was forbidden to buy shoes at a whites-only store, she could now, thanks to government pressure. Where I was not permitted to attend a hockey tournament next to white concession seaters, I could now. And when my grandson was educated in mathematics and English and biology, he no longer had to be restricted to a Colored-only school.

Life from 1955 to 1965 was prosperous for the Canadian Negro while he still toiled in America to gain freedoms he thought were prescribed in the Constitution.

It took until after the unveiling of the new Canadian flag on February 15, 1965, before I decided it was the perfect time to return to my mother country. I wanted three generations of honest, hardworking Black Canadian citizens to witness the rebirth of

their home under a crimson maple banner and sing “O Canada” just one last time. By the time I took advantage of the dual visa that had been kept on my person, the Voting Rights Act was being implemented, and the second year of the Vietnam War began. Many people, both American and Canadian, were perplexed that any Negro would want to go down south to where race relations were not so safeguarded, but I did that because I knew Dr. King was already making enough change so the state of living would at least be tolerable. Besides, I wanted to see my parents again, though I soon learned they died years before, living in abject poverty. But the most important reason was that Canada’s homogenous culture was boring to me.

Occasionally, I would get together with my old comrades, spend a day drinking coffee, play tennis for a bit, and visit their kids and grandkids. Other times, my family would vacation in Manitoba or Quebec or other parts of the country to test their delicacies and be aware of how much race laws were different.

Every ten years, though, I would return to France and Belgium, solemnly kneel next to the gravestones of the fallen, place lilies and roses on their grassy beds, and weep for several minutes like their deaths happened

yesterday. Especially Jonathan Salt. As a G-d-fearing Christian, I imagined my comrades watching over me in Heaven, either praising my heroics or scolding me for not doing enough to save them. The visits to the cemetery always remained private so that my emotions would seep forth unhindered by outside interference, save for the songbirds who would swoop by to peck at the nuts and seeds on the headstones or the feral cats and dogs devouring any vermin that came around. I knew my son practiced the same tradition for his war buddies who met their maker in Europe and the Pacific.

1955 and 1965, that was his tradition; mine was from 1928 to 1958. And now my own grandson will continue the same tradition depending on whether or not this damn conflict will end. It took over a year for U.S. officials to recognize my dual citizenship as confirmation of my status as an American veteran. They justified it by claiming I never fought for the United States.

Bullshit.

This had to be revenge for transferring to another nation's military where I was treated like a man instead of a disposable tool. Anyone who graduated from West Point and

served as a cadet in the U.S. Army, even for a month, earned veteran status even if he only worked as a volunteer. Ironic that my grandson Bart was easily accepted as a volunteer despite not possessing U.S. citizenship.

When he returns overseas, Bart will be officially recognized as a permanent resident. And that's funny considering he was the most resistant to leaving his Ottawa suburb. The only thing that could convince him was enrollment at the recently integrated Harvard where he would study for a medical degree. As for my son, he spent twenty years of his life pursuing music after the war.

My name is Thomas Finch, and this is where my readmission to America has led me. Perhaps not a full one, but at half embrace, did the country direct towards me as I directed half, not full embrace towards the country - a steady job, less lynching, less hate, less discrimination, less oppression, and finally recognition of my services to the forces of freedom. It will still be hard, especially in my old age, to reassimilate to American culture. It took me time to accommodate to my paralysis in the first five years after World War I, and it took time to be accustomed to Canadian culture for the first ten years. Hell, the demon

of guilt and trauma still passes through my very nostril, especially from regret of not being present when my parents and grandparents died and buried. Some fell from broken hearts while others succumbed to cancer, muggings, and auto accidents.

All I'll know is that my grandson will realize that his comrades are not prejudiced against skin color, that the legacy of Dr. King is being unveiled, that social values have changed over the past five decades. And I don't mean all this free love, weed-smoking bullshit. I should be fortunate I never heard of Canada having its own counterculture movement because I would have hated staying there. The war in Vietnam is an honorable cause, a cause against Communism and oppression; I would rather have lived in the Jim Crow South rather than any area of the USSR. At least I would not starve in a labor camp and forcibly “share” my goods with those who haven't earned their keep.

I am seventy-seven years old. That is a good age to keep on living for another two decades or so. None of my ancestors made it that far, though I can see them humoring me from above. I hope that, when I fall ill to the dreaded tyranny of time or accursed by tuberculosis or cancer, my family will watch

over my death bed as I wheeze out, “America! America is finally a part of me! Hello, freedom! Hello, prosperity! Hello, merit!” Perhaps, my gravestone would be marked further than “Loving father, husband, and grandfather”. Perhaps sites would build bronze statues dedicated to the Negro troops who fought in the Great War. Perhaps, freedom and racial equality would flourish in the world enough so there might be no wars. There's not one ounce of regret in my soul for what I did in my youth.

Here’s to another fifty years of Veterans’ Day when the Soviets have collapsed on their heels and Europe is not divided against itself. Here's to another fifty years.

A Typical Day for a Dog-Like Cat

Light footsteps hop across the billowy terrain of Mount Jambalaya to uncover a mysterious secret with the heart of a stony temple preserved by time. Miniscule pawprints follow, masking the rubber soles imprinted in the snow with claw marks. Two shadows loom through the dark, millennia-old hallways, a winterwear-clad professional climber named Joseph Vought and his faithful, lamb-skinned, vigorous compadre Russel. They trudge through an area surrounded by dangerous spiders, more than eager to spice up the deteriorating interior with some homestyle decorating. Torches also provide sustenance against the shrill mocking tone of Mr. Darkness, sovereign of all things bleak and insufferable, who imitates a banshee.

"Look, an ancient spear pit!" Joseph cautions. "Better find an efficient solution to the puzzle there, boy."

Russel twinkles his eyes as though the immortal spirit of his grey-hued ancestor flowed through his veins and converted soft fat into the muscles of war. Thus, this furry acrobat enables us to commit feats rivaling that of the greatest Olympians of our time and

dismantle the trap with ease. Emulating the tactics of the extinct Rofeiti civilization, the explorer cracks the death-defying code without breaking a sweat or skin or his temporary flame. The process repeats itself again and again until the dynamic duo moseys down to the alter, uncovering a priceless fortune in defense of all quadrupeds: A simple, bug-eyed rabbit devoid of fur or flesh but substituted with a scarlet-azure plaid crossover with ears askew from all nooks and crannies. Reanimating itself before the treasure hunters, the shivering plaything hops from its tomb, catalyzing the temple's suicidal motives. For it's a hollow body without an adorable essence.

“Follow the bunny of Emperor Suun!” pleads Joseph.

Russel's goal line is sure, and he badgers the innocent toy into a corner of the collapsing temple after a wild goose chase.

Rip!

Tear!

Shred!

Chew?

Bleary-eyed, Russel wakes himself from fantasy to the reality of the situation. Not only

is he a Persian rather than any wooly dog, but his master's asparagus-hued pajama bottoms have withered from the sleep-induced frenzy.

Who knew it was all just a maddening dream, a striking ambition for adventure?

Joseph awakens from his silky sheets, enrobed in periwinkle sleeves, contrasting the murky asparagus of his pants. His beautiful siesta is an ensuing apocalypse of décor. He notices his ripped pants and the tatters on the matted floor and then stares at the cat, not with disgust in his eyes but mere amusement.

“Oh, hey there, Russel. I'm not mad at you. It must have been a wild dream, huh, boy?”

Soon after, Joseph discards his nightwear for more affordable morning clothes and declares, “You know what? I'm hungry. Aren't you?”

His knees crunch down for an answer, and Russel eagerly wags his silky tail and salivates his frothy mouth. A square breakfast of maple-glazed French toast, double corpses of chicken goop, and a heartful glass of juice prepared via the squeezing torture of zestful oranges would do. Russel divulges in the pleasure of kibble, his true easy-to-go prey, as well as a pristine silver bowl of H20 to wash

down the savory bits. The wool is then patted by pinkish spiders, temporarily avoiding their natural instincts in favor of rekindling their covenant with the tamed animals. To elicit euphoria, they lock down the funny bone trigger on a naked belly. Unfortunately, the feeling only lasts for a fleeting moment as the cat's master pushes rubber boots the color of coal onto his feet and hangs a cinnamon-colored jacket onto his back.

“Well, it’s time to leave for work,” utters Joseph regrettably. “Have fun for a few hours!”

Then the portal to the outside world opens for its master and closes for its servant. Russel's gaping mouth shrinks at the notion of a moment of isolation. Grandfather Clock smirks like he was when the hour struck for his human comrade in arms.

“Just a few more hours, eh, Russel? Can't you cats sense time?” the masterful sadist of eternal boasts, laughter muffled by its bronze innards. “Aren’t you going to cry for me?”

The statement demands irony in itself.

Cue the Shakespearean drama:

Woe is he whose four-legged motors tap at the marble door in anxiety, his contagious

tears running full to where even the tightest of gaps yield to filling. Many are the mewls of a desperate feline. Nothing in the house would distract him: not the ethereal kitchen, not the vast living room, not the palatable library, not the awestriking backyard. Even the toys on his bed, molded after bacon and bones and his favorite character Superman, aren't enough to delight his senses.

After merely thirty minutes, a face frozen in time stares back at Russel, its identity revealed at the base of the stairs: the bunny of the ancient Emperor Suun. Eyes morph into that of a starving raptor, jaws encase the preserved relics of his feral ancestor, hisses emanate from within the once gentle jowls, and cheetah speed goes on the max. He skids up the spiral staircase, the cotton fabric minimizing the grip of his toes until a great crack is heard. A broken femur juts out, allowing a blood trail to seep and absorb the pillowy material so clues would be so ill-defined. Russel limps and limps down step after step until his vision fogs, and blackness slowly curtains over his eyes.

Waking up to a vision of the inside of a cage with bars in front of him and toys and a food bowl in the back, it is drained of color, a monochromatic black-and-white. As Russel mews for attention, he looks to a mysterious

man approaching him, releasing his confinement and stretching his hairy arms to the fur of his body. It is his owner who is wearing a shirt emblazoned with the logo “NBA 2008” and proclaims, in an excited tone, “So you’re the weird basket case everyone has been talking about, huh? Don't worry, you’re no longer going to be alone. You’ll be my friend for life!”

This is not a dream but a memory as this peculiar Persian recalls how, six years ago, he was adopted from an animal shelter after numerous potential buyers rejected him for his oddball, un-catlike personality. Joseph Vought was different from the rest. He always confessed to being more of a dog person than a cat person, but for a thirtieth birthday present, the man wanted something new: The more adorable and trainable appearance of a feline blended with the character traits of a canine into a perfect fur-stirred smoothie.

Hauled to the darkness of the car trunk, a temporal cage within a cage, Russel, while chewing his toy, overhears, “When we get home, I’ll have to do something about your dirty fur. It's tragic that you've been there for so long that no one took care of your hygiene, let alone given you a name. Speaking of that, what should I call you? Russel has always been

a dog’s name, but what the heck? There’s not rule saying cats can't have the same.”

There's a satisfied purr bellowing from the whiskered albeit matted face of the newly pronounced pet. Russel will find a happier, more livable hospice in Fredericksburg, Maine than he ever did in the slums of Herston. But before the car trip is halfway there, his eyes curtain over like muted clams, knowing that in the present, he is instead being transported to a hospital to confront his nemesis: the needle.

A stroller wheels forward to a whitewashed room, encasing within its iron shoulders a drowsy white carpet dotted with blood, the meshy fabric entangling the scene of the accident. Cats, the oppressed avengers and classic nemeses of Russel's “clan” apathetically glance at the most recent visitor in all motley colors while balancing on their big, hairless mothers and fathers. Dogs, bound to the gilded leash of materialism and slavery, haughtily mock the newcomer as an imposter, a scroungy, grimy cat undeserved of any canine traits. The odor reeks of cinnamon. Not even the TV fixed into a wall could spark a bright ray of miraculous sunshine; as the featured program suggests, *All Dogs Go to Heaven* is unspeakably morbid, even by ‘80s kids' movie standards. The clock hanging on the other end of the wall proclaims 4 P.M.

Lunch has taken a vacation.

“The vet is ready for your cat!” declares the affectionate nurse dressed in a sparkly yet crude rosy gown topped with a renowned pillbox hat.

The humble entrance opens, awakening the bored patients awaiting their appointments and swallowing them into tirades of confusion. A middle-aged man appoints the emergency caller and his severe case unto his office. His figure is defined by a crisp lab coat and pristine, gleaming glasses invoking a sense of security and warmness against the cinnamon-scented waiting room whose purpose is to pacify the afflicted patients.

“Hello, what may I presume is wrong with your cat?” asks the bushy-bearded professional, the honorary title Dr. Morris Binton clasped to his lapel in servitude and his gloved hands poised for activity.

As Joseph’s lungs spurts out an answer in fealty to the superior of science, a stroller of identical proportions rolls by the elaborate office, securing an unconscious familiar on the front seat: disgruntled tabby neighbor Loony III. Cheetos stir from his salty mouth, the tongue flaps in the breeze, and he is ready for

an amnesiac injection of the most infamous kind.

Will Russel, an enchanting, carefree kitty, share the same revolting fate as the snack junkie was before?

Peepholes off the windows imagine yes, though the surgery is completed under precarious methods. The defining spirit of Russel's smooth-skinned, sand-hued ancestor relinquishes the last of energy stored within, fermenting bravery and resilience combined with stirring density and patience and molding a unique super feline to endure the sketchy details of the procedure without incident. Prodding knife-wielding fingers helplessly trigger the hiss function before modern age bandages soothe the unfurnished soul. Russel has never felt so inspired by his remarkable recovery, though a scar remains in the shape of stitches and bandages.

“Thanks, Dr. Binton,” Joseph graciously remarks as he pays the surgeon $400. The human turns his eyes towards his furry friend. “Okay, boy. Now is the time to leave.”

As they depart from the clinic, Russel notices Loony III, still driven by his human owner on a stroller, exit the door to the left, weighing five pounds shorter yet preserving his disgruntled temperament. Master and pet

then enter their lime-green Scion, and the innocently mischievous Mr. Sun temporarily retires from his momentous day job, dissatisfied by the dozen-hour employment of sweltering fury on inconsequential bystanders. He permits an entry pass for his younger, brilliant sibling, speckled with a Swiss cheese-like face for the last half of the day. In spite of the bandages on his leg, Russel's temperament is eerily comfortable, especially when a rollicking tune about an astronaut who abandons his wife for a space trip plays on the stereo.

“Man, if I didn’t come for you at the right moment, who knows how much worse the situation could’ve gotten?” Joseph points out.

His dispassionate response to his furry pal’s nearly fatal predicament is just as eerie. And if not for Russel’s vigilant mewls while beside him, Joseph's words would have been his last. Just seconds earlier, a ten-wheeler was in their path, roaring like a mindless beast and unintentionally ready to render the passengers into a fine tomato-hued paste. Joseph abruptly skids his car to the right before the Maker would meet them, and he glances in his pristine front-view mirror to express the firmest of gratitude.

“Thanks, boy. I let myself get distracted.”

Russel only reverbs with a violent yawn, indicating that the Sandman now has influence over the slumbering animal. Joseph sighs at this unexpected act and manipulates the speedometer from thirty to forty miles an hour in the hopes that their destination would precede his best friend succumbing to the whims of night. To his misfortune, Vought’s brazen act triggers the alertness of a checkerboard-patterned automobile with blaring scarlet and azure lights chasing him while blaring the most disruptive of sounds. It's the traffic cop, out for vengeance against anyone violating the traffic laws of Fredericksburg. The cars parallel park against each other on the side of the road.

“Sir, I have to ask you to stop,” the cop implores.

His well-trimmed straw-hued mustache, bright blue garments, and doughy structure connote a sense of affability from a reasonable authority figure.

Joseph could only woefully respond with, “I have to get Russel home or else he's going to fall asleep.”

The officer is unsympathetic, raising his sliding sunglasses up.

“Not my problem”, he retorts. “The rules are the rules. Now, you'll have to pay a fine-

Before the cop could finish his sentence, Russel looks into his eyes from the passenger seat with the most innocent, desperate face imaginable. Looking back, the cop surrenders to the cat's mastery of hypnotism.

“You know what? I’ll just give you a warning this time. Don't expect me to be this merciful again.”

Regardless of the cop’s stern tone, it is leveled against the uncertain shudders rendered from his lips. Would he dare upset the poor man's travels?

Joseph again turns his head to his savior to reward him with thanks.

"This is the second time you've saved my keister there. I have to owe you when we get home. What do you want? An extra treat? Extended belly rubbing time? A walk?

The answer is revealed ten minutes where, inside his luxurious house, Russel's corneas glow a dazzling lemon yellow as if to ascertain whether he must answer to the wild call of pace, of exercise, of recovery, of eternal

strength. They provide vivid details from his amigo's cashmere sweater and “2014 World Cup” trousers, from his plaid shirt to the balmy hair interwoven on his torso. The demand for the plebian leash is nigh from his inhuman gestures.

Joseph nods in agreement.

“I could do for a good walk around the neighborhood.”

For fifteen minutes, Russel trots along the cool sidewalk and across the hardened stream of tar, basking willfully in the novel concept of moonlight. Darkness, sovereign of all things bleak and insufferable, now corners on Sun's turf. Loony III prowls through the vacant territory, no longer impurifying the asphalt with an orange crumb trail but protesting his owner's gifts of playthings via carrying, in its maws, rotting carcasses of innocent pigeons. Their orange eyes were unbearably cold at the sight of their imminent deaths. The ginger-bearded onlooker is disgusted by the sight, his face revulsed as if he smelled garbage.

“Okay, Russel, I think it's time to head back home so I can prepare a good dinner,” Joseph states with a tired look.

Returning to the house, Joseph cooks gourmet beans and eggplant casserole smeared with homemade Mexican hot sauce, ground innards of potatoes with a dash of fattening butter, and a delicate slice of apple a la mode, all taking the cake compared to meek sandwiches and watered-down cola back at the staple factory. In his own way, Russel salivates for some hefty delicatessen, tail springing outwards as though to smite the pesty, journeying horsefly, but his own meals are in a couple of sweet milk bones instead. Cat food does nothing for him.

“Okay, light's out,” utters Joseph. “Get ready for the next day, boy!”

But today is not over. G-d would shift to a worthy day for one more special event, concocted only for Russel. Silent footsteps protrude through the mahogany door at 1672, coupled with tranquilizers and interface, smoke sensors slacking at their job, and a musty doorstep caked with unruly soil. A fuzzy, shaggy carpet rotates over to its side, suspicious of the daring infiltration as a stout stranger, clad in pitch-black spandex in homage to the cheap costume store, scours the house for something of egregious profit to all cat burglars and prowlers.

But what is this artifact so precious as if to commit an unconstitutional violation of home privacy, you ask? Who knows?

The noisy stirs of the carpet disconfirm the truth as tippy toes survey the quiet second floor, noticing the whimpers of an ornate jewelry case studded with pearls, rubies, diamonds, sapphires, and the like. Beneath the overgrown ebony sock adhered to his face, the stealthy delinquent's eyes morph into slits, the jackpot merging into his private collection of stolen heirlooms.

One more score for the burglar! One more score for the burglar! One more - what?

click

The startled eyes of the reanimated wooly mattress clasp up and trail down the perpetrator, unleashing the heightened senses of fragrance detection to protect a family heirloom passed down from Panthera leo. The aroma of tobacco meshed in his mouth has betrayed its consumer to nature's law.

There he is, the prized bunny of Emperor Suun, Russel tells himself.

He imagines the thief as the legendary harlequin doll, a figment of real life. Again, with the anxious snarling, of the jaws gazing muddily, and once a bark sounds the dogs of

war and the scripted retreat from the vacant drawing-room.

A splendid symphony of the great Russian master Igor Stravinsky won't save you now.

What prose is there from the heroic sanctity of achievement? Linen pants were torn to shreds due to the ruin of wickedness and greed, resulting in the fellow tripping across the spiral staircase and awakening Joseph. He runs down the hallway to the exit of the stairs, curious about the noise.

“What is going on here?” the man nervously demands.

He flicks a light switch, looks down at the unconscious burglar, a hand slouching on the staircase and carrying a bag full of stolen possessions.

Joseph can’t help but feel pride in his fiend, trying to contain his sniffles.

“Russel, I can’t believe you prevented that man from robbing me. Who would’ve known that a cat would make an effective guard dog?”

As an immediate reward, Joseph walks over to the dark kitchen, avoiding the tripping power of the crook’s unconscious body, and

provides Russel with three milk bones, thrice as many as his usual evening treats. In the long term, heroism honors Russel with an abstract medal and endless love. The crook is arrested and behind bars. The jewels inherited by father to son are preserved. And, as a coincidental event assembled by G-d, something special is brought over to the shaggy, slumbering cat's comfortable bed the very next day.

Is it a new special treat?

An improved studded collar?

No!

It's the fabled bunny of Emperor Suun, mottled fabric and all!

“I bought it from your favorite store just two days ago,” Russel’s owner declares, grinning with his wide, white teeth. "I hope you enjoy it to your heart's content."

Yes, it’s the good life for Russel the Persian, whose mischievous adventures are far superior and unlike his kind.

A Pastor's Holy Mission to Save the Jews

"Viktor Lievkiss: September 12, 1879-April 23, 1945. Loving Husband, Father, and Grandfather".

That name was engraved on a tombstone, a cheap one dampened by rain, soil, and decay. It has been forty-five years since the man's passing, and neither my body nor my soul is no longer what it once was, yet the memory of him is still fresh in my mind. Viktor should not have left this earth so early, especially not in such a miserable manner. Tears well in my eyes just remembering the time I spent not just with him but with his fellow congregants. For the first time since 1956, I am permitted to visit the graves of my congregants, a full one hundred thirty-two of them struck down before their time. Today, I return to the Jewish cemetery in Cafetière d'Óbuda with strong winds gusting leaves and

air against my skin. A family of survivors descended from Viktor, including his daughter Alexa, her son-in-law Bartal, her daughter Lisa, her grandchildren Moshe and Csilla, and his great-grandson Lazlo, thank me for revisiting his final resting place. Csilla, in particular, hugs me firmly and kisses my cheek in gratitude, uttering, “My great grandfather called you an angel of hope. I think so too.”

Despite the punishing weather, I place a small and delicate pebble beside the tombstone to join seven others, wrap my body in a tallit, wear a yarmulke on my head, and recite the Mourner’s Kaddish with the family. It is not out of tradition but reverence, for I am not a rabbi nor a hazzan, not even a Jew. I am instead a humble Lutheran, a former minister of the Church of Our Savior in Gweta, a village seventy miles from Budapest.

You may be wondering why a Christian clergyman would take his time comforting Jewish grievers instead of minding his own business and orchestrating Sunday services, no?

That is an excellent question, and the answer is found through a time when the Nazis occupied Hungary and Jews were treated less than human.

My name is Benedek Almassy, and I was born in Hungary on June 3, 1901. Originally, like my father, I intended to be a physician dealing with secular maladies and ailments, but, after years of attending church, I was fascinated with the duties of the clergy and aspired to be one of them. Besides, by the time I turned eighteen, conditions were so morbid for the newly independent homeland that it was hard to find a secular job.

After worming my way through church hierarchy for five years, I was appointed cantor by Reverend Peti Becskei who I loved almost like a father. For seven years, I served the role diligently and earned respect from my congregation.

On my thirtieth birthday, my mentor had grown too old and tired to ordain services, and I was permitted to take his role. My administration lasted for fourteen years before the fascists tainted and dismantled church grounds. But even as a fiery reverend who led his congregation to prayer and preserved the spiritual unity of the community, my faults were many.

In my youth, I took an admiration for the Devil’s drink, tempted to guzzle four bottles of liquor each night without my parents noticing.

And shortly after I was ordained, I developed a dangerous addiction, often succumbing to intoxication to the point where I wrestled my mind back for church services every week. If not for a remedy, I would have been kicked out of my church, living destitute on the streets and destined for purgatory. But lo, did fortune come when I met my darling Zita early on in 1933, two years after being ordained.

She had just begun to attend my church, and, despite being ten years my junior, her beauty astounded me. Her hair was a glossy blonde, her cheeks were rosier than any blush could provide, and her skin was so perfectly porcelain as if she was a doll. After years of getting to know each other, whether in church, our homes, or in the beauty of the outdoors, we engaged in a serious relationship and Zita's clean, moral character negotiated my abstention from all vices.

On October 3, 1936, we were wedded by my mentor, weathered and crusty-faced by the forces of time. And yet, this joy and celebration melted into whimpers and scandal in less than three years. I disobeyed one of the Ten Commandments and went to bed with a struggling, miserable woman who came to my private home so that she could afford necessities for another day. Initially, I thought

simply of exchanging money, but the woman insisted on providing a service as her own husband left her. Even though Zita did not recognize my adulterous act at first, I had too much guilt on my consciousness and admitted to my sins in private. On July 30, 1939, we agreed to a divorce, whitewashing the reasons in order to protect my reputation. Thanks to my betrayal of the sanctity of marriage, I lost not just my wife but my happiness.

For the next five years, I resorted again to liquor for comfort and redeveloped my addiction. What did not help was the news of my homeland agreeing to ally with Germany in war and allow the army to patrol its spaces. I heard stories of how they treated anyone different from them: Slavs, Catholics, Jews, Communists. Even Presbyterians would be punished if they defied Nazism. As consequence of my decline in morals, some of my congregants left the church because they could not stand the sight of bloodshot eyes, stuttering speech, and a distinctive vulgar stench crawling from my lips. Believe me, no one loathed my new, blasphemous appearance more than myself. I kept begging Jesus for answers to how to find redemption and, each time my pleas failed, I felt like I treaded steps and steps closer to Hell. So, after attempting fasting, meditation, and all other manners of

religious rehabilitation to no avail, all hope seemed to be lost – until March 23, 1944.

Four days after the Third Reich officially occupied my beloved country and installed antisemitic laws, an elderly couple urgently knocked on the door during the night, begging for shelter. Thanks to the Nazis' influence, Jews were being rounded up and sentenced to ghettos and concentration camps.

They must have been in hiding in order to still be on Christian grounds, I told myself.

Unfortunately, the couple was not initially let in by my cantor Rikárdó Sima, an unashamed antisemite, though not as malicious as the German occupiers.

"They might be Jews," he argued. "Should we allow them within the house of Jesus and risk the fascists finding out and closing us down?"

I was no sympathizer of Hitler or the Third Reich even at the start of their reign, and I certainly never believed in their so-called "Aryan superiority". It was only false devotion to their puppet regime, that my life was

protected from day-to-day. However, I could not agree with my cantor's views.

The Lord granted me an opportunity for my conscience to be cleansed; I had to shelter these people even if I became a pariah to my congregation and the oppressive regime I lived in. Thus, in a brief state of sobriety, I overturned the order and promised the elderly couple, Szilárd and Magda Denberg, that this place would be a sanctuary. Many balked at my choice to allow Jews in Christ's temple. Even the cantor assumed that this was the drinks talking for me, but I knew it was the right thing to do.

No longer would my eyes shy from the disappearance of our brothers and sisters from our community. No longer would our doors be closed to the starving, the abused, and the marginalized. However, the tactic that had doomed other churches which granted Jews sanctuary would have to change to much disdain; our Jewish guests would have to assimilate.

One month later, the Nazi inspections would arrive to purge the seats of Jewry, and these refugees had to bear no resemblance to their targets. Thus, I did what I could to masquerade the couple as proud

Presbyterians: no yarmulke, no Torah, no Yiddish nor Hebrew openly during services. Only crosses, Hungarian hymns, and the Bible were permitted. Like succeeding congregants, the couple initially resisted temporal conversion.

"Relinquish culture and identity for the sake of safety?!" Szilárd exclaimed. "I would rather take my chances with the Nazis!"

It was only his wife's sweet defense that convinced him to stay. Privately, when services closed, and existing members departed to their comfortable beds, the refugees were permitted to remain and worship to their own choosing. Communal baths washed them, benches bedded them, clothing, meals for bake sales and holiday feasts fed them, and clothing, once to be donated, dressed them.

Over the following month, twelve more new members of the church community offered themselves sanctuary, and, every time they were accepted, the same reactions came: A father, furious eyes burrowing deep, declaring he would rather be strangled or shot than praise Christ. A mother weeping like an immigrant being forced to assimilate to another culture. A daughter blowing a

mocking tongue and a son shouting profanities. Within days, with much persuasion, they also relented and voluntarily taught themselves to recite well-known New Testament quotes and hymns to prepare for the inspection.

On June 13, they came, the sound of black-uniformed soldiers with cold faces and armbands shaped like arrow-barbed crosses barging through the door, spreading through the grounds and monitoring the mingling of Christians and disguised Jews for any speck of non-Aryanism. They were led by Corporal Tibor Farkas, a former friend who I missed since graduating from Reformed Hungarian Theological University.

In the early days, he was not gripped by religion like I was and in fact believed that secularism would win in the end; by this point, however, as a member of the Arrow Cross Party, he seemed entirely alien. Tibor gloated how my mentor (who was unfortunately antisemitic himself) made him see the light and half-jokingly mocked my oratory skills as if belonging to a jaded comedian.

As I begrudgingly left him to his work, Tibor and his subordinates checked every gum for rotten “Jewish” teeth, every pocket for “un-

Aryan” trinkets, any utterance of non-Christian hymns or Yiddish mutters. By the grace of the Almighty, they never checked the bunker behind the church altar. All the stashed properties and items from the refugees were concealed there during services. An hour and a half of flowing sweat, eyes askew, and teeth clenching passed, and the fascists left but not before warning the cantor and me to alert them whenever suspicious individuals infiltrated our church.

My experiment had finally borne fruit. The disguised Jews passed the test even when skeptics adamantly refused to believe that these people we were harboring would last long.

Over the next year, success rang one hundred twenty more runaways to the church bells, though, as consequence, many who were with me for a long time gradually faded from the congregation like southward mist. Many believed the Church of Our Savior was overcrowded, at risk of trampling or lack of personal space; others merely despised Jews and kept their steaming anger under a kettle for far too long. Despite my values about Christians and Jews being brethren who should coexist in harmony, as many as fifty of

my veteran congregants still uttered unholy slurs.

"Vermin! Parasites! Christ-killers!" were among them.

Even Vendel Nagy, one of my favorite congregants and the staunchest advocate for Christian unity, sarcastically recommended for atheists and Muslims to join our ranks. However, the cantor's behavior was the worst. On July 16, he demanded an ultimatum from me: loan him money to compensate for his care for the Jews every Sunday or he would leave promptly. I never thought Sima possessed much admiration for Jews, but to ask such a selfish request was too much for me. Thus, I refused to cater to his whims because of the church's budget and the necessities for the homeless, which meant I was left without a cantor for three months. As difficult as it was to perform services without hymns nor an assistant to guide the congregation in case of an illness, I carried on, rarely intoxicated. The replacement was forced upon me by the Arrow Cross Party, who had recently taken over the government and aspired a puppet to oversee the presence of Jews. Fortunately, Ambrus Gabor, with his unassuming stature and rosy mannerisms, was more tolerable than Sima ever was and

continued to keep the Jewish congregants a secret.

He - along with two-thirds of the remaining congregation - backed the wise decisions I made, especially as I was entered a sober rebirth. From the first moment of my treasured desire for salvation, I knew no more of the Jewish visitors than just tools for my destination to Heaven, to free me from alcohol's grip. Over time, however, I grew to love them as if they were my regular congregants.

Between services, I learned their ancient traditions and customs in their enclosed space, from the Hebrew and Yiddish languages and the wearing of the tallit to the use of shofars and timbrels. I also gave the Jews as many necessities as I could afford. When freezing children and the old cried for warm blankets, I covered their bodies. When the flies and mites bit through the skin and their clothes reeked like week-old fish, I repurposed a baptismal tub for secular designs and ordered fellow church workers to replace their clothes with clean ones.

Even when Jewish Holy Day utilities were all but destroyed, there were adaptive measures. For Hannukah, ordinary wooden

tops and eight Sunday candles were adequate substitutes for traditional trinkets. For Passover, the church brought forth unleavened dough intended for sacramental bread, shrubs from the garden, baptismal water rinsed with table salt, market eggs boiled on a steamer, and purchased apples and nuts chopped and soaked in wine. And for Sukkot, one refugee was a rabbi who already carried foreign flora while fleeing from the fascists and used what he could to build a tent inside the bunker. Nothing was wasted if it meant the church's finances would sink. The Church of Our Savior was no cathedral but an average-sized house of G-d desperate for funds.

And lo, the developments!

On August 4, a young tailor's wife, Georgina Tahlberg, gave birth to a newborn child from a makeshift hospital inside the bunker while a disgraced doctor monitored their hygiene. And on November 21, a tailor's apprentice named Ferenc Paltstein organized a wedding for his bride Rachel, with the same flora-carrying rabbi serving as officiant and me as an observer. The breaking of the glass was particularly memorable to me. Unfortunately, on January 18, an elderly peddler named Moshe Sondgut lost his war with heart disease, and we buried him in the churchyard

discreetly. He lay in the cheapest of coffins caked in twelve feet of dirt and under a gravestone with no engravings. Next to what would happen in two months, it was the second most depressing scene in my life.

On most occasions, though, I was happy, vigorously celebrating events and making the most joyous of friends, including the late Viktor Lievkiss. Not only did he share the same interests as me, but he was responsible for acquiring funds to renovate the interior by selling biographies of Martin Luther I wrote in my youth. Blessed is him to donate fortune to all inhabitants of the church and blessed is him for permanently walling my distance from the demons in my mind. Despite the celebratory progress caused by the newcomers and a more tolerant substitute cantor, eventually, the darkness came.

On the night of March 26, 1945, a furious excommunicated congregant ratted out the bunker to the authorities, and while the event caused no casualties thanks to the miraculous escape of all Jews to the front of the church, all memorabilia, scraps, holy books, and food became nothing but ashes and smoke. There was no going back, and it would only be a matter of time before they found us.

I was right.

The following morning, the fascists returned with Judas, who I recognized as Endre Horvath, a cynical, bitter old man who was among the first to leave the congregation. I knew that he loathed Jews and savored their deportation, but I never thought he would go so far as to actively collaborate with the forces of hate and tyranny. He entered with a grim smile on his face as if savoring my betrayed reaction before being dismissed. Tibor came to inform me I disregarded national law by harboring Jews on church grounds. Even when I claimed that the man's lies were slanderous and that all my loyal sons and daughters were as Christian as could be, there was no measure of resolve to my former colleague's skepticism. The Devil corrupted him with notions of superiority and nationalism for years, and it was proven when he brought samples of cooked pork to the pews. Whether it be ham or sausages, swine is forbidden from the Kosher diet, so it was the perfect tool for separating the authentic from the fake. No excuses for full stomachs nor allergies nor vegetarian appetites were convincing enough when the entire congregation of four hundred and seven were tested, and almost a third refused to dip their tongues and gnaw into something so foul.

This was doomsday.

This house of worship was not safe anymore.

All who discarded pig meat were rounded up, arrested, and transported to the concentration camps; As for the Lutherans who stood by their reverend through the past year? Some were sentenced to exile and others met their end by firing squad. My fate was different. Not only was I forced to watch the cattle cars carry my Jewish guests to their deaths, but my former friend informed me that I would be personally executed. He expressed only disgust and anger, claiming I cared more for Jews than my own people.

“You are a disgrace to your mentor!” Tibor spat. “Peti Becskei will be laughing from Heaven as you burn in Hell!”

Those were crude statements for sure but nowhere near the level of witnessing my beloved church being torched to cinders, stained glass windows shattering into colorful fragments, stables overturned, the haunting marble statue of the Messiah on the cross shot about. All this destruction because the presence of Jews “impurified” holy ground.

The Church of Our Savior had been around since 1846. To see nearly a hundred years of history torn asunder was maddening, akin to witnessing an adopted baby thrown from a cliff.

But then, while part of my loyal congregation was shot like migrating geese to a hunter's line of sight, the cantor, bless his soul, was stripped of his clerical wear, beaten with the butt of a rifle, and hung like a lowly criminal just for going against what those demons hired him to do.

Hours later, after being locked in an unsanitary jail cell with no dignity for my body, I was freed for only a brief moment, not knowing I would meet the same fate that was etched on my scalp, a double entendre to my Christian faith and treacherous actions against the "Great Hungarian Government of National Unity".

On my way to execution, hearing the cries of "Filthy Jew lover!" by the hateful audience, almost every scrape of my life was drained by a sadistic torturer who, in glee, drew the butt of a rifle as a bludgeon. I was bleeding profusely, with bruises splotched on the body like moldy bread and broken ribs and limbs required laceration; I could feel the

ropes tightening around my wrists, ankles, and neck as the executioners tied me to a telegraph pole, arms spread out. I could feel oxygen slowly exiting my lungs. I could feel my eyes bulging, my heartbeats racing, and my throat growing coarser.

Did the Eternal intend for me to perish from this earth a righteous martyr?

But lo, I merely passed out, and there was enough air in my body to live. The Lord had rewarded me for my moral fortitude by preventing my execution so I could spread the word of my tales across the world. Earlier, I almost gave in to the darkness when I threatened to strangle Farkas before he could send my children to their untimely deaths, but my restraint stopped me.

Thought to be nothing but a mutilated corpse, the fascists left me on the telegraph pole to serve as a warning for three days until Soviet bombs devastated the surrounding area, and soldiers freed a vegetable of a body. For all that I heard, the abominable Ferenc Szálasi fled, the Arrow Cross Party collapsed, their allies were near the point of surrender, and most of the death camps were liberated. Eleven million men, women, and children were murdered in the most abominable of ways,

including most of my Jewish congregants. Even when restored by doctors in a Soviet-control hospital, all I could do was weep tremendous tears and cry that I could have done more.

I could have collaborated with other congregations to save more Jews. I could have helped protect the entire population of Hungarian Jewry before 1944. Alas, life is meant to be full of suffering for mortals, and I had to suffer with them.

Out of the one hundred thirty-two harbored under my care, only forty-eight lived long enough to avoid the gas chamber and the shootings and the beatings. When I recovered them, some were living in refugee camps, others lived on the streets; some were driven out of their sanity while others lost all sense of positivity. Even one woman, Christina Goldfinch, confessed SS officers forced her to slay another fellow in a conflict over food, deeply regretting such a barbaric action and desperate for mental care. I remembered before she was such a sweet congregant who refused even to harm a fly. What all the survivors had in common, however, were nightmarish, skeletal bodies, hairless scalps, pus, and blemishes infecting the skin. The unholy images were all too much to bear, and

it took many years for them to recover as did I, a disgraced reverend without a home.

For forty-five years, I wandered for any remaining members who might've survived, attending seminars that advocated for tolerance and earning a medal in Israel as a Righteous Gentile. But during my journey, many skeptics still refused to hear even a syllable from my story.

"A pastor disguising Jews as Christians? How much drink did this old man take?" they would argue.

I never let their accusations get to me. I am proud of the work I have done, though I made plenty of mistakes. And I made one more on October 24, 1956.

The new regime's disdain for all things religious filled me with disappointment. I thought the Communists would bring about a freer Hungary than it was under the monarchists and fascists, but instead, they imposed state atheism. Still, I stayed under their radar and led the congregation in Christ's Church of Unity, forty miles away from Gweta. It was not until I begrudgingly supported the people's march against Soviet

tyranny two days after it began that I was labeled a traitor and forced to abandon my home once the revolution was crushed.

Now, my new home is in New York City, where I have made a fresh start not just as a professor at a theological university but as a member of an interfaith council advocating for harmony between religions and fighting against all forms of prejudice. I have lived for eight-nine years, and despite my advanced age, I have made the most out of it. The first step to renewing the Christian faith must be tolerance.

As Jesus Christ said in Matthew 22:39, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

I will forever love all people - no matter their creed - because G-d wills it so. As for now, I remain content with the hope for the unity of all faiths and universal justice against every inhumanity in the world.

Digging a Tunnel Through Shiloh

May 17, 1865: The date of my release. I have been imprisoned at Fort Duprey for three years as a Confederate prisoner of war. It takes until my shackles are unbridled, my freedom outside the cell bars is no longer limited, and two blue-cottoned guards approach me with empty hands before I realize the battle my brethren and I fought for is over. At last, we have the pleasure of returning to our lives in the beautiful fields of the Deep South. Yet the words bite as hard as a Minie ball splintering into a man's thigh.

"You're free to return to your pathetic life in whatever backward swampland you came from. But don't think just because the war is over, we haven't forgotten your treachery, Reb. We won't forgot that little stunt you pulled near the fields of Shiloh, either."

The guard's beard bristles to match his eyes and grimace in contempt. Even as I stroll

out of prison, abandoning the peeling walls, feces-strewn floor, and stench of a decaying crow, I know the life I made on the family farm in Oskwe, Mississippi is in tatters; it's a casualty of Union raids and scorched earth. And most Northerners would see me only as a damn traitor who almost split apart the Union. I can tell my fellow former jailbirds know that too. They lumber towards freedom, with faces so ghoulish and clothing so ragged that even the Devil would pity them. I can't say the tasteless gruel, six hours of slumber or the emaciating prison labor were the sole causes. And yet, the guard's quote strikes me like a thunderbolt.

"We won't forget that little stunt you pulled near the fields of Shiloh."

I'm famous and infamous; every guard and prisoner know about my feats since the commanding officer decided to share his account like a telegraph wire. The tears I pour in happiness are mixed with melancholy.

I'm a nobody no more. I survived through a thicket of blood and screams, yet what'd I sacrifice? My brothers – my two little brothers, whom I swore to protect with my life.

After a stroll through barren marsh, my eyes grow acquainted with the sun's burning

rays. The light no longer blinds me as it did minutes earlier when I squandered in darkness for three years. However, my mind blacks out, and I wake up in the body of my younger self on the family farm thirteen years ago.

Acres and acres of grass grew to be nibbled by horses while cattle, pigs, and chickens were herded into pens of hay and feed. The brick-red barn neighbored eighteen cubits of corn, and the farmhouse neighbored fifteen cubits of tomatoes.

It was a magical period of my youth, for while I may've been poor in wealth, I was rich in leisure: roughhousing with my brothers, taunting the livestock, listening to the religious hum of cicadas, smelling the morning dew and pine, letting every lonely ladybird climb my toes. But for one day, I cried; I cried, and I ran to my pappy in the farmhouse.

"Elias is hurt! The Grams' son wanted to steal his toy! He broke Elias' ribs and, when I came over, I got a black eye! Please help him, papa!"

"No!" he violently slapped my cheeks as if they were molded clay. "I ain't yer brother's keeper! You are! And if justice is to be served, ya better grow some balls, boy! Like a man!"

I carried Pappy’s word when I approached Hiram, that spoiled, entitled bastard with a red spot bleached on his forehead after weeks of labor. My fists made his jaw shatter like glass, and Hiram was a sobbing, bloody mess of a boy writhing in his field of cotton and corn. I retrieved his toy – a wooden horse - and returned it to my brother. The other one, Clyde, his trouble was different.

My mind flashed to a year later, when he almost drowned in a ditch the size of a wagon during flood season. He was always the clumsy one getting into places where he shouldn’t, yet I had the fortune of grabbing his arm and pulling him out just as the water began to rise. Unfortunately, my pappy was a hard case there too. When given a chance between praising my heroism when I could've become another victim to the violent forces of wind and rain and chastising the cold, wet, muddy body Clyde dipped himself in, the gristle of his beard and the thumping of his veins knew what the answer was.

As Pappy pinned my brother to the judgmental cross, the memory whited out, and I was now in front of a Confederate recruitment officer garbed in a butternut shirt, deep blue hat, beige gloves, pine-colored boots, and trousers the hue of the Mississippi

Delta. It was the fifth of March 1862. Mississippi seceded from the Union and was about to join its brothers and sisters on the western and eastern borders to fight for independence.

When the officer declared, “Jebediah Carthight, will you serve in the Army of Mississippi for the glory of the Confederate cause?”, I needed no further persuasion. My family didn’t own slaves, the next family didn’t own slaves, and the family next to them didn’t own slaves. It didn't matter. State pride was more important. If the governor ordered me to severe every knot, braid, and link with Uncle Sam, so be it. He never cared for the plight of the farmer anyways, only the rich and powerful. Besides, I needed to be a man, a true man who wouldn't disappoint his dear ol’ pappy.

But my brothers? They weren't so keen. Elias’ concerns were not bigger than the farm. Even voting for the governor or a congressman would carry an air of reluctance.

And Clyde? Well, he disliked violence - any kind of violence. Clyde wouldn't brace a fist even if an angry hog or bull were to charge at him. My mama hated violence too, and she urged Pappy to defend her position.

“No son of mine is gonna be sacrificed and buried before our time!”

Her complaints fell on deaf ears next to a terror of a man who, while short and hunched, nevertheless had the brawn of a wrestler.

“Irene, shut yer damn pie hole!”

He spat with a glance that could be heard across Mississippi and into Alabama. Pappy rarely had an indoor voice, even in his younger years, though I guess the death of Grandpappy Joseph ten years earlier must've made him even grumpier. However, when he spoke to the young officer, it was like a gentleman's spirit entered his mouth.

“Apologies, sir, ma wife don't speak for ma sons or me. All three in front of ya are glad to give themselves up to our noble cause.”

And when my brothers protested once more, he added forty chilling words I remember to this day.

“Boys, if y’all show yer tail between yer legs and refuse to follow yer big brother's footsteps, y’all ain't getting a parcel of ma land when I kick the bucket. Ya hear? Don't disappoint yer dear ol' pappy like this.”

At the time, I thought he was doing my brothers a favor. The only way our grandfathers could be men was by beating the British. But now I know he's Judas.

He gently kissed my brothers by hand and promised safe travels yet expected them, if not leave as broken men, to die as expendable resources he would no longer waste soup bowls or glasses of milk on. As we followed the trail of the horse-riding officer out of the fields of tickseeds, corn, and tomatoes, dark clouds masked G-d’s holy sun, the odor of pine and dew escaped our noses like rapture, the air chilled our lungs rather than warmed them, and the only thing that greeted my ears, aside from the trot-trot of the horse and the mutters of the thunder, was the cursing of my mama back in the farmhouse. Most women would simply wail in the arms of their husbands, but she had more gall than that. I imagined the family farm wouldn't survive long, not just because of the absence of young hands and feet but because my parents were on the verge of separation. Wonder if news of my brothers’ deaths and my capture pushed their relationship off the edge.

But my past self couldn't think beyond *“I’m about to enlist in the Army of Mississippi. I don't know whether or not I'd make it out of*

the war alive or unscathed, but I'll lay down my life for my home state."

One memory flashed to another, and I'm suddenly at boot camp on a night of rain, thunder, and lightning. We were handed the same butternut shirts, deep blue caps, pine-colored boots, and trousers the color of the Mississippi Delta hours ago. But absolutely no gloves. Those were officer luxuries; so were jackets. We stood in the rain, cold and soaked, our whiskered faces drenched like a morning bath in a pond, our eyes nearly blinded by the drips and the drops from above our heads. And for what? To practice bayonetting the enemy or, in this case, men of straw. Shooting would have to wait until the gunpowder was dry.

The next day was bayonet practice again, this time in the sun. No chance of a ruined uniform but still glare in the eyes.

It took days of extreme weather before conditions were right, and I could stab a straw-filled bastard point-blank. Elias' skill was almost equal to mine, but he couldn't give a damn about fighting. Thus, every effort was half a heart, lazy, less sweaty, and more apathetic.

And Clyde? Oh Lord, his pacifistic attitude was throttling.

I could only shake my head in shame as he stood four feet in front of a strawman, holding his rifle vertically and then pulling it back arm length over and over. I had to do something; I was my brother’s keeper, which meant it was my responsibility to prevent this nineteen-year-old from embarrassing himself in front of his comrades and superiors. And clearly, Elias wasn't going to do the job, so I told him, “Imagine this mannequin as a stack of hay. You’re jabbing through this thick mound of straw so it could be picked up and carried over to the horses’ trough.”

By the grace of the Almighty, my persuasion worked like a charm. His hands no longer fidgeted, and his innocent, juvenile, clean had the air of excitement, not anxiety. Yet Clyde needed to shutter his eyes to imagine what was only inside his head. What a shame the tactic didn't work during shooting practice. My aim was never the strongest, but Pappy taught me to gun down crows that flew across the autumn sky and tried to make our cornfields their breakfast, lunch, and dinner. None of us bothered to retool some of the barn’s hay for scarecrows, and we all thought it best to earn an easy, exotic meal. Elias went through the same ordeal, but I reckoned he was also motivated to pretend the mannequin was our old man. I had enough patience even

in adulthood to deal with Pappy's shit, but he didn't. He spat on that bitter grouch any time he got, even if it resulted in a whooping. But Clyde, who often had his ass handed for refusing to hunt or butcher, couldn't face his phony foe.

Bayonets are one thing. You could stack a haybale or a slab of steak with one of these sharp bastards. But guns? Their only purpose is to maim – or kill. No way can you justify a rifle as a benign tool.

And so, my youngest brother stood twenty feet in front of the strawman, holding his rifle vertically, then pulling it back arm-length. Eyes open, body shivering, face contorting to “I know I've fucked up. But I can't do it, damn it!”

This time, I had no solutions. This time, the other soldiers noticed, and Clyde became the target of embarrassment, referred to as “Baby Cly” across the mess hall and “yellow-livered lazy wretch” by the officers. There was never a minute he was around without even the tiniest sliver of snickering. Had I not requested Clyde be assigned as a scout, the officers would've subjected him to inhumane treatment or, worse, sent him home to face Pappy's wrath. To these assholes in their gilded buttons and fluffy collars and their

studded lances perched in their belts, my brother was a wimp - a wimp with uses - but a wimp nevertheless. I comforted him where Elias failed. I'm my brothers' keeper, no matter their age. Besides, I had trauma of my own. With every skirmish, I feared either me or my brothers or all three of us would leave behind this mortal plane and my mama would've had no reason to live.

The night before Shiloh, before all hell broke loose, I suffered a nightmare so terrible it would shiver the bones of the hardiest trooper. We were all alone in a field of grass and dirt with cone-shaped trees behind us.

Peaceful, uninhabited wilderness.

But just after witnessing a family of cottontails hop into their burrows, one man coughed like hell, bled from the eyes, nose, mouth, and ears, and collapsed without another breath. Another followed, then another, then another 'til a hundred thousand of our bodies flooded the earth with our blood. The only survivors were the rabbits smart enough to bury their homes beneath the surface.

I woke up in a cold sweat.

I wasn't sure if that was an omen or just a fever in my head.

Would we be ambushed by enemy forces we couldn't see, or would we perish from nature's wrath? What was the significance of those rabbits?

Nevertheless, I told nobody what I dreamt that day. Even when my brothers checked up on me at the tent where we slept in a carpet-sized blanket, I brushed off their concerns.

“My sleep was disturbed by those damn owls, that’s all.”

My excuse was convincing. Owls did hoot through the night, and many of my comrades emerged from their tents to curse and complain. Boy, I was wrong to keep confessions to myself. By the time we marched to Shiloh, Tennessee, to unite with the rest of the Army of Mississippi, our regiment had trained for only a month, often delayed by extreme weather and disgruntlement.

Why defend a state many a soldier wasn't born in?

The presiding officer didn't help matters, exclaiming his distaste for the Union appropriating the Army of Tennessee and the Confederacy assigning non-Tennesseans to defend the state. But under the command of General Johnston, there was hope to make

fools of the Yankees. Once more, a white light flashed in my eyes, and it was now 6 A.M.

We overran Union camps, pillaging every valuable supply. I could hear the general hollering about barbaric and ungentlemanly behavior as I retrieved a dinner knife for Elias' enjoyment. A more soothing alternative to the bayonet. However, the victory didn't last long. Eight hours later, after pushing Union lines farther and farther back, the Yankees told us they had enough of our shit.

My worst fears were realized when we attempted to ransack Peach Orchard on the belief that the blue boys were asleep like kittens. Everyone emerged from their tents and downed one Rebel, two Rebels, three Rebels, four Rebels. I was lucky we were in the back of the line, yet I could hear the dying and wounded screams as bullets flew and pierced their organs. This field wasn’t bright with grass; it was a muddy road surrounded by dead trees and hills of melting snow, a setting you would see in a Gothic novel. I respect the man, but General Johnston should've known when an ambush was an ambush. Thanks to his foolery, we didn't just lose him but hundreds of my compatriots as we retreated to Hornet's Nest.

General Beauregard took over command, boasting that he conquered Fort Sumter and achieved victory at Manassas. Frankly, I cared not one bit about his record. Johnston’s boasts were spectacular too, yet he led my unit for less than two weeks. I wasn't sure that he wouldn't lead on more reckless adventures.

Would I defect and betray my new country?

Clyde wanted out so bad. His first taste of war traumatized him without contacting a single enemy. All those bodies, all that blood, all those screams echoing from soldiers rushed to the camps with bleeding sores and stumps. On the other hand, Elias was predictably apathetic, and I was patient enough to believe the Lord could turn our fortunes around tomorrow. Sleep forced me to rethink my perspective.

Same nightmare, same grassy field, same burrowing rabbits, but instead of a lethal disease overwhelming us, a torrent of blood ran between the trees and drowned us all like G-d ordained the destruction of both forces.

I woke up again in a cold sweat, though the chilly weather contributed to it.

And this time, I told my brothers. Clyde was convinced it was an omen that we should

flee from Confederate duty, but Elias was skeptical.

“Everybody got some bad dreams,” he answered with a dismissive scowl. “Ain’t meaning shit to me.”

However, all three of us agreed we should hightail it out of here before our mama loses her sons. We understood now was not a good time. The officers wouldn't count us simply missing. They would count us as deserters and pronounce a bounty on our hides. The plan had to be orchestrated tomorrow in the heat of battle, where they would assume we were dead or captured.

Another white light flashed by, and I woke up, writing a letter to Mama on yellow parchment with permission from the commanding officer.

In the morning, representing all three sons, I told her, “In case we are killed or captured, don’t mourn for we fought with conviction.”

The first step was to send a letter to the postmaster and pray it made it from Tennessee to the family farm. But the second step? It was finding my brothers someplace to hide while the bullets were greeting each other.

As we marched to the river, I noticed a spade near the road. It must've been for the future burial of thousands that would succeed this day. Already, hundreds were put six feet under after the Peach Orchard ambush, three per plot.

Why?

Because casualties were higher than suitable land space and to dispose of pungent, rotting bodies. I had the solution right before my eyes, and all I needed was a little push to run over there and dig a burrow six times that of a rabbit.

That opportunity came at 8 A.M: Hamburg-Purdy Road.

The smoke from our firearms and theirs was so thick and gauzy we could see no flags and could only hear bullets flying through the mist like migrating geese and my comrades lurching in one end.

And as far as the enemy?

I could only hear them crumple from the other end. There's a reason why the fates of everybody in my second dream were a river of blood. This day wasn't simply a massacre of Rebels; it was hell for the Yankees too. It was only by the grace of the Lord that the only wounds ever inflicted on our poor souls was a

cut on my cheek from a bullet that grazed the surface. I knelt behind the stack of bricks that served as cover, coddling my crimson blemish with a purifying white hand as the blood began sliding down my cheek.

"*So that's what being a man is about,*" I thought. "*Just like my grandpappies fifty years ago*."

I inflicted an impressive number of kills even through the fog, but now I had to let Elias take over. What a damn foolhardy time when I heard the shooting cease and the running of Yankees start. They were tired of defending themselves from a distance of twenty yards through barely visible puffs the hue of my grandpappy's whiskers. Yet Elias didn't hesitate to fire upon as many of those bastards as he could. Only one was lucky to come close enough not just to reveal himself in abhorrent blue but also to breach the covers. Elias was too distracted, too tired after fifteen minutes of "Fire! Fire! Fire!" to notice an intruder. Had it not been for Clyde, I would've lost a brother without the power to do anything about it, paralyzed and clutching my face. By the time I stopped sponging my wound and looked up, I saw him bayonetting the soldier in the neck before he had the chance to do the same to Elias. Then while the enemy choked on his own blood, Clyde stared

in horror because he thought he had committed the worst deed imaginable.

To hurt a man, no, slay him even in self-defense was a cardinal sin that violated all he learned for over fifteen years. I couldn't blame him for kneeling on the muddy road, dropping his musket, breathing like his lungs were giving out, and staring into G-d knows where. Clyde was only sixteen; he was young to the game of war, and his innocence had been tainted by the blood in his bayonet.

Yet there was no time for sulking, only retreating. No more war, no more suffering, no more killing. Just run back to the place where a rusted iron spade had been laid to rest, and dig a hole wide enough for all three to hide in until the battle was over and all forces left. It was painful to abandon thousands of Rebels to their fates, officers too blinded by smoke and deafened by the roars of armed conflict to look for deserts. Their lives were less important than those of my brothers.

In thirty minutes, we collectively unearthed a mound of dirty the size of a molehill, enough time before any soldier could retreat and notice what we were doing. And as we jumped in, me first, Elias second, Clyde third, I knew my brothers showed their most repulsive faces. Twelve feet of dirt with the

grubs and the critters that made it their home. It wasn't a pretty sight. Not to mention we would have to be standing in our own piss and shit if it came down to doing our business. But their disgust paled to their anger when I proposed we build a tunnel from here all the way back to Oskwe.

“How the hell are we supposed to do that?!” Elias barked. “None of y’all asked to retrieve the shovel. Look! It’s twelve damn feet above us! What do you expect from us, claw the dirt like G-ddamn badgers?!”

Clyde's rebuke was different and softer.

“Awww, I hate the dirt! I hate the smell! I hate the bugs! Why can't we stay here until all is peace and quiet?”

In the past, I suspected my brother might've been retarded, but that moment was confirmation. We may've lacked the privilege of formal education, but Pappy afforded a private tutor who sent books and knowledge. Clyde held back; that's why his behavior was no greater than that of a child, and the lack of any whiskers symbolized his regression. But as his big brother, it was my duty to not treat him like an infant.

In clear terms, I told him sticking around our manufactured hole would arouse

suspicion. Suspicion would arouse attention. Attention would arouse accusations of desertion. Desertion would arouse execution.

“Ya wanna be exposed and hung like a criminal? Well, do ya?”

I pressed my sandy beard hairs parallel to his clean chin in contempt of his question. Besides, who preferred lolling about in a place of blood and feces until our rations run out or we weep of boredom. I raised a vote.

“Ditch or tunnel?”

Clyde joined me on the tunnel solution, but Elias remained stubborn as a mule. We left our weapons behind to signal capture and raked the dirt wall with Clyde's eight-inch pocketknife. It was enough space to crawl under, a leisure if we were ten years younger but a pain in the ass now. To avert the chance that anyone would see our tunnel, the last one to leave the ditch pawed a clump off the opposite wall to close the entrance. Now, we were all alone in near darkness, cramped like canned sardines, soil caking every edifice. I carved out more of the dirt every second, every minute, every hour, every day navigating eastwards to Mississippi. Unfortunately, that meant towards the battle too. We may’ve been two stories deep, but we could still hear the booms and the crackles

and the screams of war's barbaric parade. Even the soil above us started to quake, threatening to bury us in grime and total darkness.

By Christ’s grace, for an hour, we broke through the chaos of Shiloh until all was quiet, save for the general's call to retreat and “Look for any rapscallions who abandoned our noble cause.”

Desiring rest was only one of the reasons we occasionally paused for; another was consuming rations.

Just before we began our work on digging a ditch, we pilfered our comrades’ camp for a week's supply of hardtacks, biscuits that resembled soap bars, smelled like expired bread, and tasted like soured milk. Unlike previous days during training, they hadn't been dipped in coffee yet, which meant those unpleasant crackers could now cut teeth and were swarming with maggots.

What else could I bring?

Fresh food wasn’t part of the standard military regimen, and the luxury of meat that the officers enjoyed had already run out.

Would we feed on the worms and the critters that crawled and squirmed above and below us instead?

My brothers had to toughen up, claw out the maggots, and chew through wheat-like brick with the most repulsive faces I've ever seen on a man. Even I felt the urge to spit out hardtacks on every nibble and wish for the days when vegetables, pork, and cheese sat on my palate. Crude rations weren't our only obstacle. Whenever one of us had to take a piss, he would cut a hole through his trousers and undergarments, and if in the front or middle of the line, slide down and drench the bottom soil. It would’ve been a hell of a burden to unbuckle the belt and remove trousers each time, yet it was annoying for one of us to crawl through a pool of piss. We couldn't do anything about shitting except brown our pants to our collective disgust. But if you thought expelling waste was enough, try digging by hand.

By Day Three, the knife’s edge dulled away and wasn't more than an inconvenient spoon, forcing me to dig my once pearly white fingernails into the dirt. My brothers called me Badger Jeb, a nickname I will forever associate with misery and embarrassment.

Then, my pocket watch went missing.

It served as a reliable guide for when the sun rose, and darkness fell, but it disappeared

from my garb after waking up on the third day of our journey.

Damn the mole, damn the rabbit, damn whatever creature took my precious watch in the middle of the night.

Now, I could surmise how much light was entering the tunnel and how visible the color of crap was in front, left, and right of us. We'd gone without water for two days. My brothers asked why I didn't take a canteen.

My answer: "It wouldn't fit."

Their eyes were ablaze with red-hot anger as they cursed my name and urged me to dig to the surface this instant, no matter the risk of Yankees or deserter hunters discovering us. Just as I was about to concede, the crack of thunder echoed in my ears. Then, I heard the rain dropping from above the tunnel. Then, I saw rainwater slip down the soil like life-giving veins. Then droplets drip-dripped over our heads.

Hallelujah! The Lord has provided a miracle! Just as how the Israelites marched for forty years, relying on manna to sate their hunger, so have we been granted the right to lap up the sky's most beautiful invention!

Of course, it took hours for us to be fulfilled. Trapping droplets on our tongues was

a much harder task than we thought. Not to mention our caps were soaked like hell, and we could feel ants or critters crawling on our heads to steal our dew. But the rains of Tennessee saved us from dying unrecognized below twelve feet. The miracle didn’t last long, though.

Twenty days went by, and Elias and I noticed Clyde wasn't feeling alright. He was crawling slower and slower, his face was sweating like a pig, and his breaths were heavy like a stone was placed on his back.

As we tried checking him up, Elias suggested, “The lack of air must be getting to him.”

Wrong answer.

We would all be feeling that. Besides, we poked pores into the dirt above us to allow air and light.

Elias guessed again.

"Well, maybe he got a fever before we went underground, and now the effects are setting in."

Another wrong answer.

I know my basic medicine. All of us would've been infected from our extremely

close quarters. The cause of his ailment had to be isolated somehow.

“Well, maybe, his exposed cock hit a rock, and he's slowly bleedin’ to death.”

Thrice more, the answer was wrong.

We couldn't see any trail of blood behind us, and when Clyde rolled over to his side, we found no injury. The veins on Elias’ forehead became visible.

“Damn you, Jeb! Maybe G-d did this to our brother! Maybe he's supposed to be like this! I don’t know!”

His eyes twitched in a fusion of despair and anger. Elias didn't have the answers, but damn it, he wanted one so desperately; so did I.

Then Clyde stopped crawling as though his body weighed a ton. We pulled his arms, one inch forward, one inch forward – until two handfuls of hardtacks spilled from his shirt pocket. They were supposed to be consumed weeks ago, yet while his brothers’ supplies were dwindling, his was no shorter than what it was after Day One.

"What happened? Why're you refusing to eat?!"

I demanded those questions like a mother would if she found her child bitten by a snake. All Clyde could mutter was “… Penance.”

“Penance?! Penance for what?!” I hollered while shaking his body. “What sin against man or G-d have you committed that deserves you punishin' yourself?!”

Clyde couldn't raise another word, but Elias intervened as Aaron did in front of an Israelite crowd.

“Remember what happened at Shiloh, Jeb? Remember when he gutted that Yankee's throat to save me?”

I then recalled the bloody musket, the thousand-eye stare, and the cynical attitude, and I connected the dots. For days, the guilt has been eating Clyde, so it paralleled not eating anything after the first day. He wanted to die. He wanted to go to purgatory because his soul felt unclean. I couldn't convince my brother to take his medicine. Shoving hardtacks in his mouth would've been like feeding meat to a Catholic on Good Friday or making a chicken peck on tomatoes. Elias kept calling me.

“What are you doing?! Feed him! Feed Clyde, damnit!”

I tried telling him how stubborn my youngest brother's being, but Elias could hear nothin’ about it. He tried the same tactic I did, but Clyde's lips were pursed. And when Elias’ hands pried them open like a clamshell, Clyde spat out whatever contents he was fed. He truly wanted to lose the war on hunger, and nothing, not even his brother’s keeper could do anything about it.

“Oh Lord, Jesus Christ, King of Heaven and Earth, hear my prayer,” Elias clasped his hands in reverence. “Make my brother hungry again!”

I retorted, “Save those prayers for later. He needs a doctor quick!”

What a silly word.

Quick.

I couldn't dig upwards like a badger without burying all of us. We needed another ditch, one that was hopefully six feet deep. It took us another day to reach it. At that point, Clyde's health was worsening. His skin looked skeletal, his eyes were bloodshot, and he could barely move, let alone crawl. And when a ditch was discovered, my hopes flew in the wind for it was another twelve feet in length.

Did anyone know how to climb a steep wall of dirt?

Of course not, not without falling and breaking our backs.

Thus, we were in limbo – for days. While we now had plenty of space and the privilege of seeing the sky turn from sun to moon to back again, our mental states didn't improve one bit. As I was hollering “Help us! Help us!”, Elias again tried wresting Clyde's lips open and seal them with the awful yet sufficient taste of hardtacks only for him to spit out half-digested wads of cracker. Only one opportunity was left: the morning of Day Twenty-Six.

We woke up from our slumber to a bright yellow blinding ball shining above us, and Clyde was tardy like hell. 10 P.M. to 6 A.M. was usually our sleep schedule, yet here was our little brother motionless as a kitten even an hour later. Elias quietly opened his lips, slid one hardtack inside, and motioned his chin to crush the cracker to digestive bits. All we had to do was wait another hour or so, and he would wake with a decent belly, none the wiser. Things didn't go as planned. Clyde still wasn't moving so Elias tried shaking him a bit.

“Wake up, you little idjit!”

Still not moving.

Then he tried kicking his leg a few times.

“Why aren't you waking up?!”

Still not moving.

Then he went for Pappy’s good ol’ way of enacting discipline: hard slaps to the face.

“Open your eyes, damn you! Open your eyes!”

By that point, Elias’ own eyes were on the verge of tears, and his voice had the tone of a child's. Despite the effort, despite the blood rushing to his face, Clyde was still. I feared the worst, but to make sure my conclusion wasn't like a leaping bullfrog, I held my hand to the chest of my youngest brother.

No breath, no pulse.

Clyde had officially left his mortal coil. My world was shattered by his death. I was supposed to be my brothers’ keeper. I was supposed to be what Cain failed at, but I failed him. I failed Clyde, I failed Elias, I failed my family, I failed G-d. While I sighed and knelt to my knees in mourning, my remaining brother's reaction was worse, much worse.

After shouting “He can’t be! Not Clyde! He can't be dead! Clyde!”, his eyes leaked like a burst pipe, his voice bellowed into the sound of a ten-bear chorus, and he pounced on

Clyde's body as if he's a mother cradling her stillborn.

I remember Pappy talking about how I was going to have a third brother even though Mama was too discomforted to explain anything.

Now, I no longer have a second, and if we didn't make it out of here, the family would lose all three. We had to survive for our mama. But then the weather changed, and Elias' mood changed with it. After removing his cap in reverence, he slowly turned to me, hair matted like a savage, eyes that resembled a vengeful wolf, and teeth shaped to appeal to animal instincts.

"You…son of a bitch. You killed Clyde."

What did he mean by that?, I asked myself. *I didn't kill him. Clyde did that himself.*

Elias started walking toward me with hostile sway.

"If it weren't for this hare-brained scheme of yours, our little brother would still be alive!"

I now realized he would rather have died with his brothers on the battlefield than watch one of his own succumb to a slow death. Better a heroic end than a miserable one.

“Clyde is dead because of youuuuuuuuu!” Elias screeched as he rammed me into the now muddy walls and forced me to kiss the substance with the might of a hand to the back of the head.

I elbowed his chest and spat out the moist brown gunk from my mouth. As I was cleaning out my eyes, I felt a blow to my cheek, then another, then another. By the time I defended myself, the mud on the ground was not just dripping with rain but with blood.

One punch to the face.

Two punches.

Wall slam.

Now we're both caked in mud and blood even as the rain tried its damnest to wash off any impurities. I had to check up on my wounded brother.

“All done?”

I didn't get an answer as I approached his hellfire-consuming face, but I soon learned: Not quite.

Elias immediately knocked head-to-head with me, leaving my mind dazed enough for him to slam me against a wall, then another wall, then another. I collapsed with a muddy

splash. If my hardtack rations weren't already ruined at the start of the fight, they definitely were now. He came over and wrapped his burly hands around my neck.

Bad move.

I had a free leg to kick him off balance. Now Elias was lying in grime and blood, and I had the opportunity to end this madness, but I didn't want to kill him; my single purpose was to subdue him.

Wrong move.

Even while lying on his back, Elias had enough force to press his hand down on my head. My brother may've not been the smartest, but he was definitely the strongest. Years of wrestling lessons did that for him. Even in a memory, I could feel my life slowly departing from me as brown and red were all I could see; and what I heard added to the horror.

“I guess this is poetic justice. My little brother died from starvation and thirst. And now, my big brother will die of drowning!”

Was this what brotherhood has come to? A blood feud? For twenty years, we grew up together, played together, ate together, slept together, fought together. Would it have to end in hatred and murder?

I could feel my breaths slowing down as the vision of Clyde's angel floated towards me.

“I'm comin' home, brother. I'm comin' home.”

Then, it stopped. I wasn't dead, my vision wasn't blacking out, I could pull myself out of the blood-mud puddle and vomit everything that was in my gut in the past several minutes.

Why didn't he kill me?

I noticed Elias sitting across from Clyde’s corpse, which looked less mutilated than our living bodies.

“I couldn’t do it,” he told his dead brother as though he was still capable of listening. “I just couldn't do it, ya know. If I killed my remaining brother, what would that bring? Nuthin’. I’m a monster. I’m a monster, Clyde. Please tell me I’m a monster.”

He clearly lost his damn mind, and I could only pity him, I thought. *Yet if I approach any further, Elias might be triggered again.*

Thus, I just sat, said nothing, and gazed upon this miserable lump, sharing his feelings.

Suddenly, Elias turned his head towards me, tears flowing from his eyes.

“Jeb, do ya think I’m a monster?”

It took a while for me to answer that in bewilderment, prompting a repeat question.

All I could muster was, “No, you’re not. You’re just crazy and pitiful. This war, even off the battlefield, has turned us all crazy and pitiful. I don't blame you for revenging against me.” There was a lump against my throat. “This tunnel plan was all my fault. I shouldn't have put you through-”

Elias interrupted me with a sly smile on his face.

“If ya gonna say ‘hell’, don't. As much as I hate to admit, this was the greatest adventure I had in years. Even the mud fight.”

We laughed a little but then surrendered to silence, with only rain and thunder providing any noise.

He continued conversing with me.

“Jeb, as we might die before getting any help, can we spend our last days reminiscing our innocent lives before the war, for good time’s sake?”

I accepted Elias' request. Day in and day out, we would tell stories from yonder.

One was about how we squabbled over the affections of Sally Huss, the freckled daughter of a hardware store owner.

Another was how I pressured Elias to steal blackberries from Old Man Grutchen’s field.

But our most lasting memory came down to me standing up to a neighbor's spoiled kid who bullies Elias for his toy. We had countless recollections to sit through yet not enough before our skin was thinning and our breaths became shorter. We had to get out of here, but our bones were weak, our skins were bleeding, and the walls were unclimbable by anyone but a critter. Yes, ants, grubs, and worms were crawling everywhere, but neither of us had the compulsion to feed our appetites on new meals. We sat and sat and sat, resigning to our fates even as the rain stopped and the sun shone again.

But lo, a shadow hovered from above, and I could hear footsteps.

Had help finally arrived or is it just an illusion? Perhaps, Clyde's ghost came forth to say, “Don't fight the inevitable. Embrace the afterlife.”

I saw boots from above.

Wrong answer.

Were the Rebels here looking for deserters or captives?

I looked above me. Dark blue pants.

That can't be right. Our colors are butternut or grey.

Then I gazed at the full figure. Blue jacket, young, whiskered head, blue cap.

That's no Rebel, that's a damn Yankee!

And he has the most bewildered look on his face like he's just found self-captured quarry.

Elias kept muttering, “They found us. The Yankees. They found us.”

I assumed just as him that we were to be gunned down, captured, or left to die.

The soldier suddenly cried out to whoever was nearby, “Captain, I found a couple of Rebs hiding in a ditch! The third one looks dead! Should I rescue them or leave them to die, sir?!”

What I heard back was, “You found what? Let me see.”

From below, I saw more soldiers with horses and Old Glory waving like the sun while in the center was the commander himself. His beard was as long and bristled as Stonewall Jackson, yet his face lacked half the charisma.

He looked down on us, figuratively and literally, and said, “Well, well, well, my scout was right after all. We've got two Rebs trapped in a twelve-foot ditch and looking mighty gross to boot.”

He wasn't just talking about our bloodied, weak appearances. It was enough that Clyde’s corpse began to rot and fume the smell of raw meat through the ditch and perhaps the entire tunnel. But combined with the feces left in our trousers, and our lack of bathing, everything reeked of unpleasant odors.

Suddenly, he remarked, “It's a darn shame your friend didn't make it. Did you really think you could escape the Union?”

We couldn't answer much due to our drying throats but holler, “Water!”

What we received was a sealed canteen flying into the ditch for us to share. No way would they allow us to climb out of the ditch until our stamina was restored, and our stories were set straight. When the captain asked how

long we've been in this ditch, I replied that had been five days but pointed out a hole in the wall, which led to the tunnel.

He asked how long I'd been building it, and I replied, “Thirty days straight – all the way from Pittsburgh Landing.”

He couldn't believe his ears.

“That’s the most absurd tale I ever heard. No one’s ever traveled such a distance underground.”

The captain didn't laugh. Still, his subordinates did until a scout arrived and reported what he saw miles away: a pile of empty bayonets next to a ditch near the abandoned Confederate encampment at Pittsburgh Landing. And a conspicuously hidden hole in the wall. My tale was confirmed, no matter how bizarre or miraculous.

I told the Yankees everything: What forced us to desert our comrades in battle, the challenges we went through, even that we relied on rainwater to keep us alive for some time. The only detail I omitted was my youngest brother's death. It would be more respectful if we said he contacted consumption rather than starving himself.

Afterward, the captain ordered his men to pull us up from this depraved place. To him, “Anybody who survives such a miraculous ordeal deserves G-d's mercy. Besides, with you all being skin and bones, you’re harmless.”

And so, the white gloves and dark blue arms of Yankees reached out to our naked hands and baggy arms. Elias expressed ambivalence about being helped by the enemy, especially since we were gonna be locked up in whatever filthy prison the Yankees had in store for us. But our priority was survival, and one of those prisons had to have a doctor to treat our wounds. With much effort, we grabbed the hands of our saviors and were pulled to the surface. The ground felt hot compared to the cold, damp ditch, and we could barely raise ourselves, yet Elias, whispering in my ear, was convinced we could take the Yankees' weapons, shoot them, and run away.

Run away to where?

I had no sense of direction to where the tunnel digging took us other than south of Tennessee. Besides, the land looked barren, without plants or animals or even any distinct landmark. We would starve or die of thirst long before finding anything resourceful.

Instead, I asked the blue boys questions; my first was about our current location.

The captain's answer?

“Hydeville, Mississippi, young man. This must’ve been a long trip for you to have traveled this far.”

Hydeville, huh? I muttered to myself. *That's on the border, yet still thirty miles away from home.*

My second question was about the outcome of Shiloh.

“Shiloh?” the captain amusingly answered. “You Rebs were slaughtered there within a day. In fact, we’re about to take control of all of Tennessee before spring ends.”

So, I was right to leave, I told myself. *The battle was nothing more than a bloodbath.*

The last question was more of an earnest request.

“Could you bury my brother, please? I'm asking for mercy. Clyde's done nothing wrong to nobody.”

“Sure, boy,” the captain sincerely replied. “We’re soldiers, not monsters. Even

the enemy must be buried in hallowed ground.”

We were initially ecstatic, even while having our wounds mended by sponges and aid kits. However, the soldier returned with the same spade we used to dig the opposite ditch, and then he started digging the ground's skin into twelve feet of hole. I didn't care how Clyde was buried, only that his decaying body wouldn't be exposed to looming vultures or crows. Alas, Elias thought differently. I knew, in his mind, he expected a coffin, a priest, a ready-made tombstone. To him, Clyde deserved nothing better.

He immediately ran towards the digger, screaming, “What the hell are ya doin’, ya G-ddamn Yankee?!”

I tried convincing Elias to listen and let the process continue, but my words were too slow. He pushed the digger down the ditch, took the spade, and threatened to bury them both if the Yankee didn’t pick up Clyde's corpse and carry him to the surface. It didn’t matter that the Yankee was now crippled by the legs, and Elias couldn't do it himself even with his wrestling experience. He was lost to the insanity that consumed him the second Clyde surrendered to the Grim Reaper; and

such an insane, stupid act cost my brother his very life.

Bang!

A bullet zipped through the back of his shirt to what I later saw was the left side of his chest, and Elias lifelessly crumpled face downward five feet away from the ditch, the spade dropping from his useless hands. His blood spilled onto the ditch's walls and mixed with the wounds of the stranded Yankee's shattered bones.

The source of the bullet came from a smoking pistol carried by the captain, who complained, “Damnit, now, I have to haul my man’s ass to a hospital. All because of that idjit brother of yours.”

Earlier, I asked the captain why his men only had a spade and nothing more.

His answer?

“We lose more men than we can afford wooden boxes. We don’t have a chaplain either. Besides, this ain’t simply six feet. You can’t carry a human body and throw him twelve feet under the ground, and I certainly ain’t going to risk my troop’s health to disprove that. I’m sorry, Reb, but, coffin or no coffin, your brother’s one with the earth.”

Elias risked a soldier's health, alright. He had to be quickly raised to the surface and placed on a stretcher, all while cursing Rebels throughout the land. Yet, I felt a rage brewing inside me over Elias' death. I could see visions of his body twitching, his unseen mouth gurgling with blood, and a hand clasped to his chest as if trying to clog the bleeding moments from collapse.

Not another dead brother. I've made the role of brother's keeper a laughingstock. My parents will hate me. I must join my brothers in death.

Thus, I did the dumbest thing in my entire G-d-given life: I ran up to the shooter and attempted to clobber him. His men were smart enough to clobber me instead, leaving only red before my eyes. White light flashed into my prison cell.

It was now May 17th, 1862, and the first day of my captivity at Fort DuPrey. I learned it was twenty miles from my hope - closer than where the Yankees found me - but not close enough. My injuries were stitched and bandaged up, my mud-stained uniform was replaced with fresh penal clothes, my cell was infested with fleas and bedbugs, and my substance consisted of a watery stew.

I may’ve been alive, but I was neither free nor happy.

For the next three years, I would stew over the horrible, brash decisions I made that resulted in the loss of my brothers. I could’ve easily conspired with my fellow inmates to dig a tunnel out of prison, but I was too broken, weary, and regretful. Sometimes, I would hear my brothers’ voices from fellow inmates who wanted to talk to me. Other times, I could see their spectral forms residing at the foot of my bed as if to suggest disappointment. One had dirt caked over him; the other only had blood. As punishment for endangering the life of a Yankee gravedigger, Elias wasn’t allowed burial. As I was informed from my cell, his body was left rotting in the sun and picked at by buzzards and creepers.

Now I imagined Pappy standing outside bars in perpetual fury.

“Ya yellow-livered disgrace of a son, I can’t believe I thought ya were ya brother's keeper.”

I imagined Mama standing next to him, angry tears in her eyes.

“How could you? How could you let this happen to my poor little boys?! To your poor

little brothers?! I don't even recognize you anymore.”

The illusions disappeared when I clasped my hands, knelt my head, and wept while praying to Jesus for penance. He answered in the form of one final white light as I woke up on the doorsteps of a farmhouse three years later.

Have I been sleeping all this time? It’s no longer day, and the prison is no longer in sight. Neither are the prisoners.

Instead, I'm greeted by a bonnet-wearing, satin-dressed lady carrying a dish full of food. She’s Susan Plemmons, one of my family's neighbors at the time I was drafted.

“Jebediah Carthight, is that you?” she asks, as if talking to a ghost.

I begin to tell her where I’ve been, but she decides to call her husband Darrell and place me on a bed in the guest room. Absent of food or drink, I need rest and shelter to carry through tomorrow. Emerging from a nightmare where I experience my feet being dragged off a bed and pulled into the ground by the undead hands of my brothers, I start the day hearing the sounds of songbirds through the window and then the door to my room open. Susan has come with portions of

egg, cheese, and meat from a silver platter. It has been three years since my palate consisted of more than hardtacks, gruel, or moldy bread.

“Don’t get up yet,” Susan tells me as she places a glass of water in my cupped hands. “You still have to recover from your hunger and thirst.”

She has been more than charitable.

I would’ve never been allowed through their doors if not for my pitiful face or distinctive clothing. But this isn’t their house, not the one I remember. It looks larger, ornate, less of a farmhouse and more of a colonial house. As I'm fed sitting on my bed, I ask about this place.

Susan, in her honeyed voice, replies, “Jeb, we relocated two years ago. The farm business has made us very rich, rich enough to purchase bigger living space. Besides, there were rumors that the Yankees would come and rob our crops and livestock. We had no choice.”

“I understand,” I reply with a sigh.

So, this isn't Oskwe; this is plain ol' Gramerstown, more economically prosperous but also more divided between the rich and poor.

I then ask, “What about my family's farm?”

“I’m sorry, Jeb. We haven't contacted your parents in over two years,” Susan informs me. “They could still be down west or they could’ve moved. Who knows?”

I know.

I know they're waiting for me out there in Oskwe. Mama and Pappy would've read my letter and waited either for the survival of any of their sons or them to be delivered in blankets. Then her husband Darrell opens the door to my room, a toughened woodcutter.

“Susan, has he recovered?” he churlishly asks.

“Not quite yet, dear,” she replies. “There’s still some morsels left.”

“Well, when he's done, there needs to be some explaining to do.”

I know what he means.

One hour later: After fully recovering, discarding my ragged prison clothes, rinsing my filthy body in the family bathtub, and finding a razor to cut off excess beard, I enter the dining room where the entire family is consuming a warm breakfast, Susan, Darrell,

and their two young daughters, Margaret and Liz. I remember being called Cousin Jeb by them since I often gave them toys and played games with them.

“Papa, is that Cousin Jeb?” the younger one asks with curiosity twinkling in her eyes.

“Yes, Margaret, it sure is,” Darrell answers, forking the last bit of sausage pie. “And he’s finally come to talk. I see, based on your previous clothes, you came from prison. But you haven't told us anything about what happened to you before that. Where are your brothers?"

It takes me a moment to reply since the children are in the room, and I wouldn’t want them to be traumatized. Thus, I ask the parents to excuse them while I regale my long tale over the past three years.

Everything that happened since Shiloh, including the tunnel's motive: to take my brothers and me back home without detection. However, like with the Union soldiers and prisoners of war, I leave out the details of Clyde’s death and the mud fight to preserve my brothers’ dignities. I could see that Susan especially is so moved by my story that she asks her husband to escort me by station wagon to my destination, even if it means running into Union troops on the way out. It

has been a few days since my release, and the current government is a puppet state while much of my home is controlled by Yankees.

Three days later: I'm fortunate that neither my kindly neighbor nor I have run into any incident, especially in the last mile.

“There you go, Jeb,” he tells me as he drops me off. “The rest of the trip is yours alone.”

Darrell Plemmons ain’t grumpy like Pappy, yet I could tell he's impatient to drive back to his wife and daughters. Indeed, I make it the rest of the way home.

From a distance, I could see acres and acres of tickseed nibbled by horses. I could see the brick-red barn neighboring eighteen cubits of corn and the blue-hinged farmhouse neighbored by fifteen cubits of tomatoes. I could see the cattle, hogs, and chickens grazing in pens of hay and feed. And as I run and run with my once freshly worn shirt, trousers, and boots, I could see Pappy and Mama sitting on a bench, scowling.

They must've heard the news that my two brothers are dead, I thought. *And it's all my fault.*

As I walk towards them, pleading mercy and understanding, their sitting bodies fade away like mist.

What? Was I seeing ghosts this whole time?

Then all the creatures in the barn fade away.

More ghosts!

Then all the crops fade away into the barren, brown farmland.

Is my mind playing tricks on me? I told myself.

Then the once beautiful barn and farmhouse in front of me morphed into ruin and rubble, including the Stars & Bars picketed between them.

Even the hums of dragonflies and the smell of dew I once enjoyed are gone from my senses. The Yankees destroyed my home, and I don't have a clue where my parents are.

Could they have been on the run? Captured? Dead?

I don't know. But I clutch the tattered flag and weep, weep for as long as I can. I weep until I stop damning the Union and start digging two burial mounds. One for Pappy and

one for Mama, wherever they are. My farm doesn't have a shovel or a spade. The Yankees must've confiscated it. Yet there's a dry, empty milk pail left behind.

Four hours later: I finish digging two holes in the ground, and now I rip the already worn-out banner to represent my parents' departed bodies. I had to witness four relatives leave me within three years. What has this war wrought? I know Mama and Pappy, Elias and Clyde are up in Haven looking down on me, and they might damn me for such irresponsibility and recklessness.

As for the rest of the world, I will be known as the only survivor of a tunnel escape through the fields of Shiloh, and such a feat won't be covered up, not even by concealing the tunnel or the ditches we hid in. The legend will remain alive, especially when my brothers' gravestones are probably on the grounds of the former ditch. As for me, I'm going to leave my old, traumatic, antebellum life behind and forge a new path in this post-war world. What I'll do next is a mystery, but damn it, I have to get over my grief somehow.

Forgive me, G-d.

Confessions of an Unrepentant Nazi

Ten years: Over two hundred and sixty counts of murder.

That was my sentence at a German criminal court for the “crime” of helping eliminate homosexuals at Dachau, Madjanek, and Buchenwald. My judgement was not from

proper Aryans but by Westernized Germans who intended to revenge themselves on the greatest people to ever live on this earth.

And why, you ask? Why would I be so punished for doing the Lord's work? Why should I be criticized for dedicating my life to wiping out such depraved people from the face of Europe?

I should have been vindicated by the world, granted fame and wealth without condition. But the West, many homosexuals themselves, instead made me a martyr, a figure of sympathy in the eyes of the decent.

And why only homosexuals? Why not the Jews or the Poles or the Negroes? Those groups are also distinctly depraved, but homosexuals are special: They pervade every street corner looking to prey on any innocent passerby. I was one of those innocents molested by those lustful creatures.

At eighteen years of age and living by the name of Heinrich Munch, I was ready to attend the University of Hamburg and study economics. Even when high unemployment and unaffordable tuition were rampant during the years of the heinous Weimar Republic, I was able to attend using some of the income from my father's service in the Great War. I was seven at the time the conflict was sparked

and eleven when it ended, but I still remember when he returned home with seven hundred marks in his pocket and tears in his eyes over Germany's forced surrender.

Soon, I moved into the campus dormitory and was introduced to my roommate Kurt Dämer, an anti-capitalist who saw nothing wrong with the armistice, the Treaty of Versailles, and the collapse of the Second Reich which I grew up in. If not for his lavender perverseness, I would have regarded him as a mere nuisance to spit upon. But Kurt raped me, and he invited the rest of his friends in the dormitory to rape me after classes. From the intoxication of drink and hookah they forced me to indulge, I would only notice the bite and skin marks when they left. Neither my father nor my grandfather ever experienced such dishonor in their academic upbringing. Never in their lives did a homosexual student dare try to expose himself to a defenseless roommate. Neither were those animals punished for such sin. I shortly learned that the attackers were considered high achievers by my professors who were apparently in league with the homosexual agenda.

As soon as I learned of that biased, evil collaboration in control of the university, I deliberately sabotaged any chance to complete my academic years and graduate with my

degree by assaulting the very mongrels returning to their dormitories on February 12, 1926. Never would I be handed a diploma by the faggots that ran the ceremony, nor would I witness the greatest degrees received to faggots. To do so would turn a blind eye to their evil and depravity. But without my degree, I was without a job nor any income to spare as I now lived far from my parents' home.

It was only the selfless guidance of a Brown Shirt that rescued me from abject poverty. Adolf Hitler had been recently freed from prison by the time I dropped out and was leading a revolution to save Germany from the tyranny of the depraved.

My savior's name: Leo Volgutt.

He had been following the Führer for six years' worth and encouraged me to join the National Socialist Workers Party. After all, he too was ruined of university scholarship by the homosexual elite and desired justice. But only Leo thought the perverted swine collaborated with the Jews and Communists to backstab the Fatherland, run its puppet state, and fill every academy with teachings of un-Aryan sexuality.

Thus, fifty years before my trial in Germany, our companionship was lit brightly. Together, with the Nazi movement at our

backs, we would restore the Reich and rid the Deutschland of the purple peril. For nearly seven years, though, such activities were relegated to propaganda in pamphlets, posters, speeches, and radio programs. Occasionally, we were to raid homosexual nightclubs and assault prostitutes intending to corrupt angelic boys and men, but the Weimar forces did not permit us to commit “terrorism” out in the open. Even when the homosexual elite was responsible for the Depression that swept the country, we were almost arrested several times. But lo, Hitler ascended the chancellorship in the dawn of 1933, and those restricted locks were destroyed by the bolt cutters of justice. I was now given leeway to not just raid nightclubs and assault prostitutes but empty academia of the depraved and arrest my tormenters in their homes.

By the beginning of the war, the once vulgar streets of Hamburg were cleansed in blood and restored to their former glory. I was so prized for purging faggots within the state that I was offered a chance to complete my education; nevertheless, I declined. Working as a soldier of righteousness felt more rewarding than boring lectures on the sins of homosexuality. Thus, the Reich High Command appointed me second lieutenant of the Schutzstaffel alongside Volgutt. It was the

best job I had ever earned. To think that I would be so privileged as to oversee the Dachau camp which was already being supplied with degenerates.

It was like a gift from heaven. Buchenwald may have stored more prisoners, but Dachau had a higher percentage of homosexual prisoners. Herr Himmler knew that which is why he assigned me to the place. As a special package, the valedictorian students were the first to enter the camp, kept alive for three years only because I desired their torture and agony as their immoral trophies were smelted down, their intelligence was depleted through routine lobotomies, and their morale was murdered by impossible silver mining. Unfortunately, the former students were the only prisoners I had full reign over. No one else's chest was stapled with a bleeding purple triangle nor tattooed in the back with the etching "ICH BIN EINSCHANDER" which disappointed me. Nevertheless, the screams and panic of pleading cattle as their testicles were boiled off or their bodies shot like salmon were music to my ears. The desperate, unapologetic students recognized my face and fruitlessly plead for mercy.

It did not matter if I was overseen by my superiors in the observation deck, I relished

every moment, Mauser in hand, mocking the shaved scalps, the bulging eyes, the skeletal frames of degenerates who deserved every pint of scorn. Jews, Catholics, Gypsies, and dissidents deserved equal disdain for festering misery and chaos in the Fatherland, but homosexuals made my father unemployed, raped me, and sought to oppress normal, law-abiding Aryans. They are the biggest scourge to civilization. Did I ever lose sleep over the number of murders I carried out in the name of the Führer? Hardly.

But when Volgutt and I were transferred to Madjanek three years later, the chilly air stifled my nostrils, frosted my hands, and forced me to seek out sick leave in the observation deck. Other times, the food and drink rations supplied by other SS units were spoiled by the elements or infested with maggots.

“Poland is a land of extreme weather,” I heard my comrades say.

Poland’s cold was colder and its heat was hotter and the rains pressed just as hard. I hated this place not just for its weather but the ugly, smoky skies that obscured the view. You may call me a racist, a xenophobe, or a misanthrope, but do not ever accuse me of waging war on landscapes. My mother worked

as a painter for a living, and the way she brushed blue on the skies and brown on the rocky outcrops could melt even the most resilient cynic's heart. If only the Depression left her alone, she would continue on with her work. I appreciate nature more than humanity, as much as I am reluctant to admit.

Nature is beautiful. Nature neither betrays nor bastardizes. Nature does not produce degenerates.

Little did I know there was a degenerate lost in the records. I do not mean any prisoner who escaped from the barbed fences and landmines, for those that attempted to leave Madjanek were shot in the back. I mean a man that was hiding within the SS, a homosexual who disgraced our black uniform. And that was my former friend. For three years, I had been noticing subtle attraction between him and a fellow officer named Heimlich Zëlpider, but I thought he just found another friend. Volgutt never showed signs of betraying his noble ideology. After all, when we frolicked in Germany, he only spun tales of sexual adventures and introduced me to mistresses in his company. Never once did he suggestively glance at any man or mutter attractiveness under his breath.

But on October 6, 1943, I discovered them eloping in the Zyklon B facility's storage room. Volgutt told me he was to meet other officers there for a private conference.

Strange, I thought. *None of my superiors announced such a conference. And for me to not be invited?*

But again, Volgutt assured me it was private and had no need for my presence. As soon as he departed, I immediately went to inform Commandant Herman Florstedt, a cynical, suspicious man with a scarred forehead and blond beard. He responded with complete furor, "I never ordered a conference! Those two must be plotting a mutiny. Report back to me when you capture them!"

Just two men, I thought.

I noticed only two men were missing: Volgutt and Zëlpider. Not enough for a conference.

Could they have –

No! I could not think they would conspire against the SS? Leo was my friend, a loyal Nazi.

Alas, I had my orders, and I could not disobey if I wanted my life to be preserved. As I said, it was no conference nor conspiracy but

the actions of two faggots. Actions I would not have known had I not opened the iron door with hesitation in my heart. I discovered them kissing, embracing in total negligence to anyone watching. My body quaked, my teeth gritted to a sharp point, and my eyes quivered before flashing in anger. I raised my pistol to Zëlpider's face when his partner pleaded that I mistook their intentions.

"I am from Alsace. This is how we welcome each other," Volgutt deceitfully claimed.

Those futile excuses meant nothing to me, and I left Zëlpider like a prematurely cracked chicken egg. And as Volgutt slipped his hand behind his back, knelt, and wept over his love's death, I asked why would a staunch servant of the Third Reich stab his old ideals in the back. All I could understand from his tear-sucking bawling was deceit from years and years ago when he swore an oath to our Fuhrer. The reason was to avoid prejudice and punishment, to feel like part of a winning team.

His whole story of university rape was a lie! His company of whores was a lie! His mentorship skills, everything he taught me was a lie!

Had Volgutt thought of me as gay too, he would have lusted after me. The faggot's confession almost induced me to throw up my contents, preferably on his face. But I chose a superior response: send him to the colonel. There, he was stripped of his uniform, of all ranks and honors, and placed in a striped shirt and pants. His head was shaven, his name deprived and his social status that of any other depraved inmate, purple triangle and all. For the rest of his life, he would live like all the other faggots: fucking in mud and working to death, no longer fit to be an Aryan. But Prisoner #9673 did not live another year, he lived only two weeks. The other faggots so hated his service to the Reich that they increasingly brutalized him to the point where he contemplated suicide. And indeed, in his filthy, feces strewn, living quarters, a swinging body hung from a noose. He had executed himself righteously for his sin, and, as a warning, his body was left hanging there until the Soviets forced it down.

I grew more bitter, less joyful about my activities in the camp. It was not due to any growing distaste for Nazi ideology, but for my cynical belief that life hates me, that my friends will always betray me, and others treat me with inferiority. There was no one in this damn place I liked anymore. Not the officers,

not the guards, ESPECIALLY not the inmates. The last time I was infused with energy was when we were relocated westwards back to Germany, back to the land of cool springs and hot summers. I was getting sick of Poland and its frigid climate. Let the Soviets have it, I thought. By the time those filthy Communists made Poland theirs, the cattle cars would have already departed with their livestock, and we would be safely out of their sight. All they would discover was a hung criminal who no one, not even me, mourned.

Unfortunately, our arrival at Buchenwald would eventually be met by an American advance. Despite emptying more of the faggots without interference from even aerial bombardment, we knew sooner or later, our camp would be targeted, and its operations would cease to function.

Then came April 4, 1945, when after eighteen months of security, tanks and trucks rolled into Buchenwald and started bombarding its defenses without notice. It lasted seven more days, but we were only able to evacuate a thousand prisoners. The nearby camps had been liberated, and the cattle cars traveling between them were destroyed. No reinforcements would come, no word from the Reich. We were too small a number to face the forces ahead, yet I did not leave like most of

my comrades. If I had to lose, I would do so not as a fleeing coward but as a raw man. I and a handful of others took the surviving degenerates as hostages and took on three thousand men without a shred of remorse. But those rotten Americans aimed and fired at the heads above the heads and forced the rest to drop our hostages and prisoners at the same time.

Our strategy was a fluke; I was never going to be able to blow apart a single faggot without the Americans firing at me first. And I knew the war was almost set to be over when their disgusting red, white, and blue banner was draped over the camp while the beautiful Swastika coat of arms was burned. Twenty days later, sitting in the same, rusty cell as the degenerates we harbored, I learned of the Fuhrer's suicide. I could not believe my ears. The Fatherland, which had been the strongest since the days of the Kaiser, had quietly bowed down to the vile homosexuals who ruled the Allies. And I was to be criminalized as a bloodthirsty monster.

During three months of imprisonment miles from Berlin, I was treated with the poorest of facilities, feeling nothing but resentment towards my captors. At the same time, I contemplated, *Has my fanaticism gone too far? Did my friend deserve punishment for*

embracing another man? My mother must be ashamed of me.

I even imagined Leo standing right in front of my cell, rasping, “You’re just as much of a monster as I am. Admit it. The Nazis have turned you into something worse than your bullies.”

Despite being almost convinced by the argument, I stood strong and dashed away any self-doubt.

Every action I’ve ever done since joining the Party has been justified, and I’m sure Mama is proud of me, I told myself.

Fortunately, I was released and allowed to live among the civilian population, and not sentenced to Nuremberg like the others. To the Allies, there were no such thing as homosexual victims. They didn’t care how many faggots I killed as long as they weren’t Jewish or Catholic.

There was only one condition they forced upon me: that I renounce Nazi affiliations. I couldn’t bear to do such a thing; despite replacing my SS clothes with a work shirt and jeans, as I still believed in the dead Fuhrer’s cause. I even revisited my parents at their still intact house to declare that I survived torture and imprisonment the Americans forced on me. Unfortunately, they were so distraught by

Hamburg's state of near ruin that they couldn't even feel relieved, barely even responding to my presence. Papa was probably too drunk to utter anything comprehensible, but I'm sure if Mama said anything, it would've been, "I should be proud for your bravery, but I need time to recover."

There was no hope of residing in Germany when the presence of homosexual activity returned. Thus, by spring of 1946, before the country even fractured in two, I fabricated a passport and took a plane trip to Uruguay where I heard that several other Nazis lived, many to escape retribution by the Soviets. It was considered a paradise where most of the population was white, and the culture was conservative and religious with hardly any faggots to despoil the lovely climate.

There, I started a new life by concealing my true name and living as a cigarette shop employee in a small town. It may sound like a degrading position for someone who contributed greatly against the homosexual agenda, but I felt humble work would help me become a new person. Besides, I needed to breathe a constant air of tobacco smoke to soothe the pain of losing not just the war but my friend.

Soon, I earned enough money to buy a plot of undeveloped land and build a farm

where I would slaughter pigs and cows and sell them to my fellow Germans.

One day, I met my soulmate Catalina while dining at a café in the capital. I couldn't speak her language as I mostly lived among the German community, but I was stunned by her beauty, her Aryan features.

Could you imagine another woman of Spanish stock with hair as bright and flowing as the golden dawn? With eyes as blue as the Pacific?

She didn't deserve to simply be a waitress at a measly restaurant; I wanted to sweep Catalina off her feet and deliver her a life of true bliss.

For months, we dated, with me introducing Catalina to German customs while she introduced me to her own people's customs; as for our personal lives, I merely told her that I was the son of an honored veteran of the Great War, that I attended the University of Hamburg to study economics, that I got expelled for attacking my rapists – but no more than that. Not my friendship with Leo Volgutt, not my raids on gay nightclubs and brothels, not of my allegiance to Hitler and participation in righteous vengeance. My revised history post-1926 was me making a living, selling used clothing at a pawn shop for almost twenty years until the destruction of

Hamburg forced me to move out of Europe. Catalina never questioned me further.

On November 16, we were married in a small church attended only by my wife's family and friends. I willingly converted to Catholicism for her since she refused to convert to Lutheranism for me.

None of my former Nazi comrades were present.

Why? Because I wanted to conceal that part of my past as quietly as I could.

For the next ten years, even as I gained success in the meat selling business, even though we sired a son and daughter, I didn't attend any reunions or rallies. My family shouldn't have been drawn to that ugly life, even if I wasn't ashamed of my past. I even raised my children to live a typical Uruguayan lifestyle, embracing both their German and Spanish roots.

Thanks to being haunted by the voices of the dead, however, I took a therapy session for the first time in 1956. I didn't expect much advice, just to take antipsychotic pills or get better rest. However, when I claimed that my homophobia started with rape at the university, my therapist, who spoke German like me, claimed that I must have gaslit myself into believing they hurt me first, that I bullied them for their views and was rightfully expelled.

“Why would any esteemed university dean favor homosexuals over the mentally sane?” he rhetorically asked.

That question enraged me to my very core.

How dare you try to gaslight me?! I am the master of my memories!

I quickly rejected that ridiculous nonsense and called Dr. Rauch a damn liar.

The only impact that conversation did was convince me to confess my real identity and past life to my wife on our tenth anniversary. Initially, Catalina was disgusted that I lied to her for years, but she shortly forgave my deception – as long as I promised to not participate in any Nazi reunions or indoctrinate my children.

Reluctantly, I agreed, though I made no vow to not cut off my children from my life if they displayed any unnatural tendencies.

It was fortunate that neither Liesel nor Bernhard felt a sense of attraction towards those who matched their gender, even as they grew up. I love them dearly and was happy to see one become the happy wife of a nursery owner while the other earn his place as a real estate salesman.

However, my grandson Serge, son of Bernhard, didn’t carry on the family tradition. He started having feelings for a boy at his high school, and I recommended he be put into

conversion therapy. It initially worked until those feelings resurged years later. On March 1, 1985, with no coincidence to the end of a twelve-year-long dictatorship, Serge invited a new boyfriend over to my household, and once again, I announced my hostilities.

No matter how much he claimed that faggots were just like regular people, that they had the same aspirations, the same feelings, the same morals, I couldn't change my ways. All the conversation told me was that sodomy was more common in Uruguay than I thought.

I don't regret disowning Serge, removing him from my inheritance and moving to Argentina without my wife; my family may've loved the country they were born in, but I saw the truth. I needed to reconnect with my former comrades, especially since they were just as abundant across the border.

For the next ten years, I entered invitations to Nazi reunions, telling my fellow Aryans sensational stories of my efforts to rid the Fatherland of faggots. I also took over a meatpacking plant and expanded it into a franchise.

Despite achieving even more success, injustice soon came for me, first with the news of my wife annulling our marriage through a phone line.

Why? Because she fell for the lies of the purple peril and saw me as too intolerant to sustain our love.

I couldn't believe she would betray my trust over what I felt was my moral imperative. Her actions so disturbed me that I resorted to smoking for the first time since I left the cigarette business.

Worse? Shortly afterwards, my daughter called me to announce that not only was she severing further contact but that her husband purchased the farm I left to my son and converted it into a more "ethical" business where the pigs and cows would be treated more like pets than livestock and the brown-skinned workers would receive better pay.

It felt like the Lord was making a mockery of my new life, that the tragedies I faced in the Weimar Republic and Poland were only a test run. I began to regret even starting a family.

But the most deplorable thing I endured was facing "justice" at the hands of a former concentration camp survivor who, even after fifty years, even after changing my name to Hans Dieter, recognized me.

The evidence of my deeds at Dachau and Buchenwald grew over time, and homosexuals were now considered a protected class, a proper victim of the Holocaust. It was no

longer safe to be considered a Nazi war criminal.

Over the course of my life in Uruguay, I heard about the trials of Eichmann and others who had refuge for years, but I thought I would not be one of them. To me, my reputation should've been concealed to the world. Besides, it would've been elder abuse and a violation of statute of limitations to target me.

I was wrong.

After being identified, I was abducted by a squad of Nazi hunters and flown on a private plane to Germany where I would face my "crime". Coincidentally, the court would be in the same city where high profile Nazis were prosecuted fifty years ago.

During the trip, I dreamed for days about what my sentencing would be. On some, it would be execution, and on others, it would be community service for the service of homosexuals.

I prayed for a quick dismissal and return to my life, though it was not yet to be.

As soon as the plane landed, I received sensational media attention as the first person to be tried for crimes against homosexuals. It is not insanity to say I would've preferred an early death from ulcers to this.

Despite my hopes, I immediately my country is even more decadent than it was

during the days of the Weimar Republic, so full of perverted music and clothing and drugs.

The Devil ruled the world now, not angels.

As for the trial, it was far from fair. The judge was not old enough to have lived in the Reich and neither were the jury, yet they unjustly accusing me of crimes against humanity. To pour salt on my sore, the prosecutor and judge used fairy tale statutes nonexistent in the Fatherland to turn the trial against me.

Who determines guilt but the victors? Why blame the Nazis for supposed “atrocities” but not the Soviets who had committed far worse? Could the West not hold themselves accountable for what they did to Germany in the Great War? Hypocrisy!

I pulled that word out of my pocket to the rigged courtroom. And unlike my former comrades, I freely admitted to every count, taking no soft stance in the least. For why be cowardly and avert credit to your superiors? I didn’t even tear up when the witnesses were called up and explained their tales of woe. My wonderful attorney Ernst Lubeck, however, tried to fiercely fight back against such fabricated charges and extended the trial by four months. We were often at odds because

he wanted to conceal my responsibility and I didn't.

By the end, the judge was not convinced of my innocence and fabricated a ridiculous sentence. I was already emotionally tortured behind in a glass booth to the point of almost feeling a heart attack, but now in these cold hallways of iron and brick, I was subjected to a true war crime. And here I am, now waiting to be chained until the day I die, waiting to be raped by the degenerate guards, waiting for my story among millions to be purged from the records.

In the end, I don't regret my decisions starting from February 1926. Mein Kampf may've not been my bible, but it showed me the horrific truth of our institutions. Until every faggot is restored to subservience, I will never drop my beliefs. I will forever keep a piece of Leo Volgutt in my heart, the piece that truly believed in the Reich's cause.

And every day, for the rest of my remaining life, I will dream of personally torturing and killing each and every faggot I encounter.

If you have second thoughts, Catalina, my children, even Serge, don't bother freeing me. The deviant tyrants will arrest you too; they will arrest us all and make the Holocaust

out to be an abomination. It was nothing of the sort. There are still millions of depraved homosexuals in the world who still control our population and decay public morality and standards of living. They must be destroyed.

Heil Hitler! Heil the master race! May the Fatherland be restored to its former glory once more!

Memorial Day 2023 in the Eyes of a Ghost

“Chris Salazar Roxas: December 5, 1978-May 28, 2003. Faithful Fiancé, Son, Friend, and Soldier”.

That was engraved on a ten-foot tombstone at Arlington Cemetery, among thousands of others. A black-veiled woman placing white roses to the soil bawled makeup-stained tears and hugged her parents as the deceased's relatives and friends joined in. They had to watch as their loved one was buried under an ornate casket smothered in

Old Glory and under sixteen feet of damp soil. The National Guard played bronze trumpets, deafening Catholic prayers.

If you asked if I was that mournful woman, I would say no.

If you asked if I was one of the empathetic relatives, I would say no.

If you asked if I was one of the devoted friends, I would say no once more.

I was not the priest, nor the pallbearer, nor even one of the National Guards. I was the corpse buried under oak and dirt, and I have been to this very Memorial Day for fifteen years.

The makeup-soaked woman was my fiancée, and her friends were also mine. We were to be married on July 4, the day of independence, but my death stifled that promise, and now she is with a new man and a daughter. I can see and hear but can never touch, to my very anguish.

Why am I speaking to you as if like I’m from Heaven?

Because I’m not.

I’m actually in limbo, a restless spirit longing for interaction with my love. I want to

tell her that I'm still present in the lingering realm and will always wish her the best kind of happiness, despite leaving my mortal shell. To understand how I perished at such a young age, you must understand where it all began: May 13, 2001.

At twenty-two years old, I completed West Point, the military academy my father Sofrinio attended, to become a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He immigrated from the Philippines during times of harsh oppression, wanting to join the armed forces so he would no longer be a defenseless, poor man. To follow in my father's footsteps was the proudest goal in my maturing life.

On the same day, I was engaged to Gwen Boyer, a graduate at UCLA who earned a degree in biochemistry. In Los Angeles, our families were apprehensive neighbors who were pleased neither by each other nor their offspring's interactions. Despite this, we attended the same schools at all levels. Gwen was a brilliant woman, not just a pretty one. I was more focused on her intelligence and skills rather than her brown bangs or fair face. In fact, she shared a lot in common with me: love for action movies and crossword puzzles, disdain for uneven flooring and crowded spaces, a desire to own a dog, etc. Alas, both parents were hesitant to accept our proposal

as my military service and her biochemistry job were incompatible. Thus, I made a promise that I would only serve for two years and then return home. In a high-ranking position, my missions usually involved sabotaging terrorist operations in Africa and the Middle East.

Thirty-one. That was the number of missions that promoted me to Captain.

On March 16, 2003, even with the conflict in Afghanistan raging, I was allowed a one-month vacation to spend with my loved ones and set up whatever wedding plan we had. But an interruption surfaced days later: America's declared invasion of Iraq. It was a hot-button issue for the military to oust Hussein from power and dismantle his weapons of mass destruction, so my vacation was put on hold. It would have been dishonorable of me to discharge when armed duty was part of my life, not an easily disposable career like civilians claimed it was.

On the brisk night before I returned to service, Gwen woke up violently from her bedrest, disrupting my sleep to inform me of a nightmare. She dreamt that I was in the center of a cold, shallow desert, and a colossal, shrapnel-shaped monster pursued me until I could not escape the maw of the steel beast. Even in the puddle of sweat she poured on the

cotton sheets and the exacerbated warnings as if her lungs were almost depleted of air, I didn’t take Gwen's doomsday rant seriously. Even before I graduated from West Point, vivid nightmares would pursue with me via visions of torrents of fire, oxygen sinking with my body on violent currents, sandstorms ripping spine and armor in two. And yet, they bore no deep meaning, no philosophical or logical explanations that loony quacks or mediums could have described.

“It will only take a couple of months *tops*,” I calmly promised her.

Desert Storm, an operation in Kuwait that my father participated in, didn’t last years, only a month.

Why should this be treated as the next Vietnam?

I pondered that question as we went right back to bed, and I left home the following day on the back of an army truck. My optimistic belief that the war would end before the summer began was not enough to dissuade the concerns of my family. All those joyless faces I saw behind me I never saw again just as they never saw me again.

It was the last time I saw Alex Natchios, a wisecracking horse better who's been a good friend to me.

It was the last time I saw Madeline LeMarc, a fashion-obsessed pal of Gwen with whom I grew acquainted.

It was the last time I saw Cara Memosa, a tomboyish Woody Harrelson fan who always invited me to play *Mario Party* with her.

It was the last time I saw my sweet parents and my apprehensive would-be parent-in-laws.

It was the last time I saw any of them, while I was alive.

I left them behind to forge new relationships among the army. The most loyal and compassionate among them was Chuck Sterrence, a closeted homosexual who considered me a friend for being one of the only comrades who didn't mock his effeminate quirks. We bonded over Bruce Springsteen music and Mexican food. It was he who was the pallbearer at my funeral, and it was he who survived an ambush and retired with a salary substantial enough to donate to my fiancée.

It had been two months since I left the cool coast of Los Angeles and entered into the

water-barren desert of Iraq where temperatures ranged as high as eighty degrees Fahrenheit to as low as twenty degrees; scorpions, snakes, and hyenas were risky predators.

For the first time since I joined the army, the unit I commanded and followed was capable of evading Mother Nature's obstacles by feeding themselves with both rations and the food of enemy camps, wearing heat protection gear on sand-hued helmets and uniforms, and avoiding the wildlife or slaughtering them with our weapons. This is what happened to a hyena that was seconds away from mauling Chuck for his food late one night. We had no chaplain with us, though plenty of doctors accompanied the men for potential injuries. The Iraqi troops we confronted were no match to our numbers and firepower, and Baghdad fell with little effort. The main goal of the war was a success with Saddam's regime toppled and the military in shambles. Yet, even as we thrusted the American flag into the grounds of the capital and whisked cool sweat from our brows, true victory was far away.

Islamic insurgents became the new target as their armored trucks, RPGs, and bombs took over the power vacuum left behind by the armed forces. Fighting became fiercer,

bodies dropped harder, and supplies grew thinner.

And the nightmares?

They returned in full force, with me lost in the Arabian Desert pursued and devoured by a creature of shrapnel. Again, I still did not believe such an omen, so I did not call attention to my comrades.

On May 27 came the failed ambush that occurred on a convoy. The wedged moon shined its silver rays on our heads, and we did not sleep for three days. The opportunity for militants, disguised as refugees, to bomb themselves feet away from the trail opened up, as was the chance of snipers from the canyon top and bushes to pick us off one by one. It was a bloodbath, a surprise offensive that would've failed had we not been confused or disoriented. I fled from the scene of battle, too exhausted to pitch bullets from my rifle. For my cowardice, a shrapnel bomb breached my safety. Unlike what occurred with Tony Stark in *Iron Man* (I learned about the movie during my travels as a spirit.), the shrapnel did not simply pierce my heart; it pierced my right calf, my left palm, and my right shoulder. I needed emergency attention before all blood would spill from my body, spoiling beige armor and black textile underneath it.

My stricken nerves induced a bellowing pain, as if I were stung by a hive of angry bees. Vision blackened as my eyes blinked faster and faster.

Twenty minutes later, the ambush ceased with only four survivors, none of whom were me.

Two days of intense surgery in the field hospital failed to stymie the blood loss even though most of the shrapnel had been precisely removed.

How did I know the details?

I wasn't trapped in an empty, pitch-black limbo; I felt more as if I was projecting my astral form as my bodily functions were failing. As a floating, invisible mass of energy, I could see smock-clothed surgeons pull shrapnel from my body with their blood-stained forceps. I could see other surgeons doing the same to ailing comrades who would not make it through the surgery. I could see my own body growing paler in color while the cut marks were deep and crimson, and the life support monitor became more frantic, losing frequency with every loud "Beep! Beep!" Finally, I witnessed a flatline and a loud hiss emanated. I was dead, and so were many comrades who also projected their astral consciousness to me.

My corpse was then returned to America, and what happened next was what I had already described. I'm not a religious man. I didn't need a black-robed priest presiding over my funeral, but my devout surviving family requested it. However, I considered this formless body of mine a penalty from above for delaying my holy union. He would make it so that I would return neither to a dark slumber nor bright heaven until I reconciled with my living flame.

Even twenty years later, the promise has not been fulfilled.

My initial reaction to the energy clusters that made up my consciousness was one of horror, a transparent silver substance making up my skin, hair, and clothing. My apparition was similar to what I was seconds before the shrapnel bombs: desert helmet, night vision goggles, fourteen-inch leather boots, a camouflaged battle dress brazened with the mark of a captain upon the lapel. It was impossible to remove the articles from my person since they became a part of me, like organs or skin grafts. I couldn't even touch physical matter despite what movies or ghost stories claimed. My introduction to the environment was phasing through any surface: plaster walls, steel fences, soil-rich grass, etc. Nothing could lay a hair or a fingertip on me,

yet no one could hear or see me either. To everyone, Chris Roxas was gone to the world on May 28, 2003, and had either flown to Heaven or remained buried in the ground in a state of eternal dormancy. But for twenty years, I watched my beloved Gwen from place to place, piqued at what actions she took in response to my absence. For most of the summer and fall of 2003, she received psychiatric therapy and anti-depressant pills to stave her immense grief.

And her dream of owning a dog?

That was sacrificed in exchange for intense work.

In the mid-2000s, Gwen began to put more into her biochemistry projects, burdened by her loss no longer. But I remember March 6, 2007; my love met Joel Weiss, a kindhearted barista who owned little income yet helped mend the wounds of my death the most.

September 12, 2008: Engagement.

February 24, 2009: Marriage.

My opinion on the man who Gwen adored was not heartful in itself. He was a Reform Jew of moral character who donated to children’s hospitals and schools and rarely lost his temper. But he becoming my love’s husband, approved by her parents, wearing a

sparkling tuxedo, and kissing her on the lips allowed a miasma of jealousy to overcome me. If only I stole his body and lived for everything a man could do for his wife. Or I could have inhabited Gwen's before the ceremony and rejected the notion that my host was in love with him. Alas, I was no Danny Phantom (a character I only found out about when Gwen visited her niece). I couldn’t reside in a solid shell and experience all the physical sensations of life once again. Even if I could finally process the power of possession today or tomorrow, I wouldn’t want to interfere in Gwen's life nor steal an identity out of pure jealousy. It’s better for me to be happy for her own choices and be remembered by what I meant to her in life, not what I meant to her in death.

But for the next fourteen years, Gwen brought a daughter to the world and christened her Cindy when she grew up to be a remarkable, high achieving girl, my depression grew. If only I heeded Gwen's warnings, if only I did not rejoin the Marines and be deployed in one of the most unstable countries in the world, if only I kept the promise to stay in Newport and marry the apple of my eyes on the Fourth of July; regardless of war, perhaps we would’ve brought forth a sapling just as intelligent and

creative as Cindy. But twenty years later is as late as any. Gwen is now forty-three-years-old, aged, starting to grow lines on her face. I, on the other hand, haven't aged a day. My apparition will forever be a twenty-four-year-old man with an outdated uniform, which means I will witness my loved ones grow old and move on, not as spirits but as angels in Heaven.

At least three deaths occurred within the past two decades—my mother from a stroke, Cara from a drunken car crash, and Chuck from prostate cancer. The last one was of most profound shame since he didn't live to see same-sex marriage legalized in America. None of them returned as spirits for none were deceased soldiers. All wallowed either in the empty nether realm or the clouds.

I feel alone in the world, like my perpetual existence as an invisible, untouchable spirit is the worst kind of hell I would receive, worse than the hell described in the Bible. But every year, on Memorial Day, my loved ones would pass by Arlington and adorn the foot of my grave with carnations, petunias, and any variety of flowers. Every Memorial Day, I remind myself I am not alone; there are people who care deeply to preserve my memory, even for all my flaws. I may not understand how to rest in peace, I may not

understand how the world has changed since my death, but I know this: I will be here in ethereal form until I'm reunited with my love in Heaven.

End of the Age of Neurodiversity

Washington D.C.: April 19, 2075: The first day of the autism cure experiment.

“For decades, the United States led the world in eradicating blindness, deafness, dementia, and other defects.

However, autism, the invisible illness, has long eluded us.

It was once accepted by mainstream society as a neurodivergent condition. Schools were established to cater to autistics, playgroups became common, and we elected them leaders in science, politics, and academia.

Our way of thinking has changed in the last fifteen years, when the numbers started exploding. Thirty percent of America's population now carries ASD. Even those cured of retardation or dementia were affected.

Autism was becoming an epidemic that threatened the social normalcy of America. Thankfully, after years of research, testing, and data, HHS and CDC, with the collaboration of mental health specialist Dr. Lucas Kim, have finally created a groundbreaking milestone in medicine that will help cure our burdensome tics and harmful anti-social behavior and bring millions of Americans back to normalcy.

And that's why we're proud that you've volunteered to be the first in the line to receive this cure."

That snippet of colorful propaganda beamed through several TV stations as an eleven-year-old girl was rolled on a gurney by men in white coats through the Institute of Autism Research halls.

Was the advertiser in his cocoa-collared business suit, gelled hair, and silky-smooth face trustworthy?

He looked as normal as normal could be, with no quirks whatsoever; this restrained girl was the opposite.

Just a day earlier, she was a wild child. Her hair was often dyed in various colors, her shoes were often mismatched, and she laughed at dramatic scenes and cried at comedic scenes. Many times, she cosplayed as a beloved cartoon character. Even her hobbies were bizarre. Most girls her age played with dolls, dressed up, or played video games, yet she spent her time drawing ugly animals or describing everything in the night sky. Such quirks disturbed her conservative parents, with the mother finally asking, “If our daughter keeps this up, she will not have a future. No college, no job, no family of her own. What should we do?”

The day that the federal government announced the creation of a cure and advertised for a volunteer online and on television was the day they found an answer, signing up their daughter on the official government website without her input or knowledge.

Shortly after lunch, her mother announced the trip.

“Ellie, it’s time to go.”

Her daughter turned her head towards her in confusion.

“Go where, Mommy?”

There was some hesitancy in the mother’s face, but she delivered a rosy, cheerful answer.

“To the Institute of Autism Research, of course. Don't worry. They will simply give you an X-Ray exam or a therapy session. Nothing to be worked up about.”

Her father backed up the white lie.

“Your mother is right. It happens every year.”

Poor Ellie believed in her parents’ fibs as she stepped into their yellow Honda and drove twenty miles through an immersive forest and pleasant music. Had federal authorities in their suspicious ambulances arrived at the house instead, she would’ve resisted, and the whole neighborhood would've noticed and protested her civil rights. The plan to eradicate autism was subtle as it relied on

familial support rather than overt repression. Ellie looked out the window as her parents drove through Washington, admiring its various landmarks from the Lincoln Memorial to the National Mall. This was the first time she had ever seen the capital in person.

"If you think this place is exciting already, just wait until we actually go to the Institute," her mother happily stated.

When they arrived there, the front of the building was friendly with bright, bouncing text as if it was meant for a preschool. The entrance, too, offered nothing but welcome with toys, picture books, and drawings of cartoon characters, while cheerful music played and the smell of birthday cake wafted through the air.

How could this be so bad? Ellie imagined.

She only realized what her parents' actual intentions were too late – when the register at the front desk, freckled with a bow tie and a checkered suit like a real-life Jimmy Olsen, matched eyes with her sweetly uttered, "Hello, you must be Ellie Nagano, correct?"

The girl nodded insecurely.

The register continued, with one arm folded against another.

“Your parents discussed your unsettling quirks and abnormalities. We at the Institute for Autism Research are glad they’ve made the smart decision.”

“What decision?” Ellie worriedly replied.

As squinty as her eyes typically were, they bulged when she aimed her head at her parents, who were paying the register $9,700, for answers. They sounded regretful for a moment before the mother turned to resigned honesty.

“My daughter, you’ll be the face of our country’s return to normalcy.”

Just like the commercials - the same eerie tone, same dehumanizing language.

“I thought you said I was just going to the therapist!” Ellie screeched with a firm sense of betrayal. “You lied to me! Why did you lie to me?!”

Her father intervened, placing his hands on the girl’s shoulders and stating with a slightly more compassionate air, “We had to in order to keep you calm and relaxed for the entire trip. Now, please volunteer for this trial. It’s for your own good. For your family’s good.”

Being born and raised in Japan, filial piety is a tradition that Ellie's parents wear on their sleeves. Ellie, on the other hand, was born in America and her response was as predictable as it was anger-driven.

“I don't wanna be cured! I like my autism just the way it is! Please, Mommy, Daddy, don't do this to me!”

Neither parent could respond, only watch as the administrator ordered nurses to roll the gurney out of the colorful, artistic entrance through the clean, white hallways. While crying and helplessly flailing her arms, the last thing she saw was the look on her mother and father’s faces. They shared expressions of concern or hope, truly believing what they were doing was right even if it meant violating her daughter’s wishes.

We're right back to the present. Here's Ellie Nagano strapped to a gurney and in the middle of the emergency room. It lacks the colorful, creative decorations in the building's front and waiting room, yet it feels less claustrophobic than the hallways. It's like stepping into any other emergency room: dark walls and limited lighting, only this one has a glass-covered observation deck and computer monitors to the side. Future victims may call it a Brazil simulation chamber, but, for the first, it’s just bizarre and somewhat intimidating. The only thing that attempts to soothe Ellie's worries is the luxurious melody of Eastern flute music. Clearly, the Institute favors calm and quiet over loud and emotional.

The head doctor arrives from the only door in the operation room with squinty eyes, a pencil-thin mustache, and hands poised to get the job done. He is Dr. Lucas Kim, the leading scientist behind the autism cure program. He was spurred to this project out of belief that the autism epidemic damaged social cohesion and made life worse for the diagnosed. At first, Kim experimented on smaller animals like mice, parrots, and dogs, curing them of repetitive tics. Today, this is the first time a human being would be a test subject.

“Hello, Ms. Nagano,” he greets her with cold calculation. “My name is Dr. Lucas Kim, and I'm here to help you on your path to normalcy. Don’t be afraid. I promise the procedure won't hurt one bit.”

As Ellies cries out that she's normal already and wants nothing to do with autism treatment, a masked nurse tightens her left arm, bulging a vein as if it's an exposed pot pie, and scrubs the area with disinfectant. All the while, Dr. Kim pulls out a syringe full of strange, jaundice fluid from a counter.

“Everyone's afraid of needles,” he advises. “But the brave know how painless the prick is. Just focus on the soothing music, and you'll be fine.”

Yet even under those procedures, Ellie refuses to let the needle reach its destination, wiggling around and wailing. It takes a second nurse to clamp down on her arms, and a thin plate of plastic is inserted between her screaming jaws so she wouldn't bite anyone. The three-inch sliver of metal carefully breaks her skin, injecting the fluid into her vein for almost a minute. Ellie’s fears are being realized. She would slowly lose the quirks and tics that made her such a particular person. Neurodiversity would be a thing of the past,

and she would act no differently than anyone else. But those fears have to be put on hold when Dr. Kim hypnotically utters, “Sleep.”

Ellie’s eyes become heavy and dilated, and her breaths relax. That’s no vaccine; simple inoculations can't treat what exists purely in the mind. Instead, it's an anesthetic, the most potent variant invented so that an eleven-year-old wouldn't struggle against possible surgery. Ironically, Ellie shrieked through her plastic constraints despite the promise of no pain, though that might've been all in her head. Even with her autism, her attitude towards shots is tolerable. Since the procedure is about curing a condition she's had a positive bond since birth, Ellie couldn't stand showing anything but displeasure. It didn't matter anyway.

After the effects set in, her unconscious body is transported to a lemon-scented dressing room where her T-shirt, baggy jeans, and mismatched socks are ripped off her and replaced with a hospital gown. The undressing and redressing take five minutes, and another five minutes are spent on a gurney back to the operation room. Every nurse and doctor refashion themselves in green scrubs, periwinkle masks, and white stainless gloves,

including Dr. Kim. How much time does it take? Ten minutes.

And the operation?

Four hours.

While the six-man team of medics sets up various surgical tools, the observation deck is finally filled. Among the audience is President Robert Mahmoud, the first Muslim to be elected to the highest office. His skin is dark, his hair is curly, and his cleanshaven face is made prominent by a hooknose. However, you can’t tell he's from a family of Arab immigrants by his demeanor, a demeanor that resembles a white middle-class Republican street-talker who boasts of patriotism and solidarity while hiding corrupt dealings behind his back.

The surgery begins when Dr. Kim executes the first order.

“Chisel?”

“Check.”

“Pliers?”

“Check.”

“Disinfection fluid?”

“Check.”

“Suction tubes?”

“Check.”

All of these tools were assembled to carve off the patient's dome of a head so her brain could be exposed and dissected.

A medical robot is brought over to assist them in case of faulty behavior. On the large projector screen at the back of the room is a digital 3D rendering of the brain with detailed markings of every region. The frontal cortex is highlighted in traffic cone orange and, with every bloody parcel removed and placed in a stainless steel can, becomes less and less complete. No other region is touched, not the one that controls speech, not the one that controls motor function, not the one that regulates balance and memory. Only the frontal cortex - responsible for creativity, imagination, and emotion. But it has to be the correct sequence, or else the patient would be left with neither feelings nor independent

thought. Brain surgery is like a game of Jenga in that way. Dr. Kim’s years of research have refined the area of neurology, so any mistakes would be minimal.

No brain damage. No coma. No death. Just a neurotypical mind.

The president looks at his wristwatch by the end: 4 P.M.

“Are you done yet? I'm in a hurry to prepare my spee-”

His sentence is interrupted when the head doctor announces that the operation is finished. Silicon replicas of carved brain pieces are glued to the bloody mass of wrinkled flesh, the dome of the head is stitched up, and bloody gloves and scrubs are washed in the room's sink. If the procedure had been performed years ago, Ellie would never wake up from her amnesia or, if she did, dribble words and wiggle her hands like a preschooler.

Ellie's eyes immediately slam open. The amnesia has worn off. The first thing she does is look at one arm and the other, puzzled over her change in apparel.

“I don’t remember wearing this.”

“Sorry, Ms. Nagano,” Dr. Kim answers with an unchanged affable tone, no longer wearing a mask to conceal his mouth. “We had to replace your clothes for the operation. We didn't want to stain them.”

“Stain them? Operation?” She feels pricks on her forehead and touches the bandages above her to feel the pain, now with a look of disgust on her face. “Stitches?”

This is the first time Ellie has ever gone through surgery. Dental work is one thing, so are injections and blood work. But having physicians cut up the insides of her body while she's in a state of limbo? That is new and, in this circumstance, going too far.

“What did you do to me?!”

The volume of her rash reaction is as average as you would expect from an eleven year who notices her skull tampered with like a Frankenstein monster. However, it doesn't reach the decibels of an emotionally sensitive, neurodivergent individual of that age.

“We had to,” Dr. Kim answers with fake concern. “The injection was merely to put you to sleep. The real magic happened to your brain. Right now, it looks like you can still speak coherently, and your motor functions are not damaged. But just to make sure, stand up.”

Ellie does so with reluctance in her lips and eyes.

“Good. Now, what's your name?”

“Ellie Nagano.”

“Where are you from?”

“Clairmont, Maryland. About twenty miles from here.”

“How old are you?”

“Eleven. Going to be twelve on July 3.”

All these answers leave him with a satisfied smirk.

“Good, good, good. So, you've got your memory down. How about writing? Can you spell a complete sentence?”

Dr. Kim pulls out a pen and notepad for her convenience. In this air-controlled room with soothing Chinese music that continues to play and the smell of cinnamon wafting through the walls, the atmosphere is comfortable enough that Ellie can write a whole paragraph in one minute about the answers she replies to. Dr. Kim looks at the notepad.

“Good.”

He gingerly snatches it from her and then shines a light in her eyes.

“Do you feel any sensitivity?”

Ellie despondently replies, “No.”

“Good.”

Chao turns the light off and his face alters to look more instructive.

“Now for your final step. I want you to sit back in your gurney, wear this headset, and don't take it off until the end of the experiment.”

She complies.

It resembles an Oculus, a long-dead device replaced by its more advanced versions. Headsets are now regularly used as therapeutic instruments because they can induce dreams or explore nightmares and phobias. But in Ellie’s eyes, the headset's purpose is to provoke images. Images that can be projected onto a larger screen so both the observation deck audience and the viewers on television watching this through film cameras can see the process without interfering with Ellie's choices or influencing her biases. The first screen shows a line split between a chestnut brown ponytail and a sapphire-hued bowl of hair with multiple sprigs.

“Which one do you prefer?”

That question is an apparent jab at Ellie's divergent tastes in fashion. Most eleven-year-old girls would rather look cute than clownish. Usually, she would pick the other option or call out the doctor for psychological bullying, but today, she falls in line with convention at this very hour. The projector screen on the wall changes with her answer: a green question mark in front of the picked option and a crimson X placed in front of the neglected one.

“Good!” Dr. Chao remarks, now with a more joyous grin concealed by cameras.

He presses a button on a remote to trigger the following slide: a picture of matching shoes on the right and mismatching shoes on the left.

"Which pair would you rather wear?"

Another jab at her lifestyle. Most people prefer symmetrical fashion. Not Ellie. She's supposed to be a wild child, yet, at this moment, Ellie joins the crowd. Everyone in the room is delighted by her answer except for, perhaps, her conscience.

Next question.

“Would you rather draw attractive pictures or ugly ones?”

Option #1 wins.

Next question.

“Is describing every star in the sky a good use of your time?”

After some hesitancy, Ellie begrudgingly answers, “No.”

Next question.

“What does this scene make you feel?”

He projects a sad, emotional clip from an animal documentary. An infant gazelle is being pursued, taken down, and ripped apart by a leopard on the plains of Africa. Her tears aren't visible, yet the sound of crying emanates from the head monitor. Some of the audience on the observation deck can only sniffle, except for the stone-faced Commander in Chief.

“What? I'm not an animal person. Why should I care about a predator eating its prey? It's the circle of life.”

A comedic clip is played next, hailing from *America's Funniest Home Videos*. The series has run as long as the nuclear weapons tests at Area 51 (long since dead). Ellie's mouth contorts to a grin when watching a mischievous Siamese infiltrate a kitchen cabinet or a Dalmatian puppy swallowing and unswallowing the willing head of a guinea pig. Days early, her face would've been repulsed.

Everyone in the room laughs except for Mahmoud, who munches on his bag of Lays chips out of boredom.

“Enough with the cutesy questionnaires, where are the results? I have thirty minutes left,” he bluntly states through his crunching, chip-covered mouth.

From that statement, the president shows himself to be lacking in integrity. Ever since the election, his motives have been purely to appease his ableist, conservative base. But one final test is ahead before the President could announce the first person to be cured of autism: Which is a better role model? Temple Grandin or Gavin Holtz?

The former is known in history as embracing her condition and starting a movement to normalize autism. The latter, however, hated his autism-born eccentricities, tried to diminish his symptoms with various drugs, and led an activist campaign to convince Congress to create and fund an autism cure program. Both video recordings of their most notable speeches are played, and it's Holtz - with his youthful appearance and gift of gab - who convinces her, the man who wasn’t diagnosed with autism until after his blindness was cured. He might’ve been the

first test subject if not for Ellie's parents signing up a tad faster. A lime green checkmark falls flat in front of Holtz’s face and an apple red X in front of Grandin’s face.

The test is over; the cure works.

Ellie's abnormal tendencies, quirks, and hyperactive attitude are now absent as if a viral serial killer had systematically eliminated the autistic cells in her body. This poor, eleven-year-old girl is now what America's government and society call “normal”.

“My dream has been realized!” Dr. Kim tearfully exclaims as he removes Ellie's helmet and allows her to walk free a new person. “I never thought in all my years I would help remedy one of the worst problems in my beloved country.”

The president stands on the observation deck to firmly shake the head doctor's left hand.

“I was wrong for underestimating you,” Mahmoud declares. “You’re the solution to our current epidemic. If my granddaughter ever contacts this disease, I'm sure to recommend you.”

In contrast, Dr. Kim is much humbler and believes more in good deeds than in boasts.

“Please, please, that's enough flattery, Mr. President. I'm no more important than anyone else who has tested my successful formula for years. Now go and prepare your speech.”

All the while, Ellie staggers into the hallway and follows a doctor to the dressing room. There, she not only discards her hospital gown and retrieves her T-shirt, baggy jeans, and mismatched socks but looks in a mirror to inspect the bandages on her head. As much as the lemon scent revulsed her, the sight of bandages and the feeling of needles on her head made her face contort more strongly. Finally, Ellie departs from the clinic where the administrator, having watched the operation on the overhead TV, greets her.

“Thank you for your services. You proved that years' work on providing a cure for autism were not for nothing. Here are a couple of free lollipops.”

She ignores his handouts to the register’s displeasure and walks out of the

building. At the entrance, her parents meet her in their yellow Honda. At first, shocked by the bandages, they soon calm down and sweetly smile. The mother is the first to talk with a face akin to witnessing a Little League Baseball victory.

“Ellie, we’re so glad at what you've done for the good of our family. Those tics that once burdened you are now gone. Let's go home and talk some more about your experience.”

She steps into the car with a gloomy look on her face, and they drive back to Clairmont. The girl’s mother tries to strike up a conversation.

“So, how was the operation?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

The mother ignores her reply and innocently remarks, “Well, maybe you will during dinner, okay?”

They arrive back at their two-story suburban house amidst the warmness and beauty of spring. Both parents are in agreement with the statement, “Let’s see what the President has to say.”

They turn on the TV to watch the speech broadcast from the steps of the White House.

“My fellow Americans, it has been fifteen years since the autism epidemic arrested this country and reduced our intelligence, communication skills, and standards of living,” Mahmoud solemnly announces. “I know previous administrations promised to hand out a solution only to double-cross their constituents. I’m not one of them. I kept my promise. The Institute of Autism Research has cooked up a cure, and their first patient, Ellie Nagano, has been successfully reintegrated into society. If you want evidence, look at the projection screen in front of you.”

At once, the screen displayed at the left flank of the White House films the procedure from brain surgery to the algorithm-based test. The methods are authoritarian, and the speech ends with a haunting, absolutist “The Age of Disability will be over soon” in front of the crowd before diverting to a special guest: Gavin Holtz. Since Ellie’s not available in the city anymore, the auburn-haired anti-autism activist is selected instead, talking about his struggles with autism and how he will be the next patient. Most of the ableist, conservative crowd wouldn’t give a damn about what their children and grandchildren want to be so

much as what they want their children and grandchildren to be. The only critical stirs are those raising protest banners instead of patriotic flags, shouting, “Don’t gentrify our Autistic community!” as they march through the crowd instead of hollering, “Remove special needs now!”

In response, the president immediately orders the National Guard to arrest the protesters for disturbing the peace. No one in the crowd bats an eyelash; they accept the silencing of the neurodivergent community, which state and local governments long regarded as threats and insurgents. President Mahmoud is undeterred from the chaos.

“Never mind the scoundrels who want to halt progress,” he utters over the roaring dissention. “You heard it from Holtz. We accept millions of applicants from across America. Join Ellie's example and-”

The TV clicks off, thanks to the father’s fury.

“Stupid TV,” he bitterly bleated. “You’d think we’d be compensated for bringing her here, but those smug snakes in their white coats only rewarded us with free lollipops.

What a joke. At least our daughter is fine, right?”

For the rest of the day, the parents act exhilarated that Ellie “became” the daughter they always wanted. Yet while they usher a special dinner where Ellie delightfully consumes costly yet conventional meals instead of the typical macaroni and tomato ketchup or cod and cheddar sandwiches, there’s something off about her. Yes, she no longer desires to draw pictures of ugly animals or gaze at Van Gogh's realistic vision of the starry sky and point out every little celestial object. Nor does Ellie feel comfortable with her multicolored hair or mismatched shoes anymore. Instead, she washes off the dye from her scalp immediately after dinner and decides she will borrow her mother's shoes for special occasions. Finally, any thought of cosplaying as a favorite cartoon character died down during the drive home. And yet, there’s still an area of pain and reluctance to make those decisions. During dinner, the parents repeat the question from the return drive as if they’re living tape recorders.

“I said I don’t wanna talk about it, okay?!”

Her voice is almost as raspy as before Ellie entered the hospital. The experience must've provoked trauma akin to a war vet who underwent torture in the deserts of the Middle East. A loud enough snap between the stringy entrails of capellini frightens the parents into never interviewing their daughter about her experience at the Institute of Autism Research. That’s not the end of Ellie's mental troubles.

Before going to sleep, she looks at every poster on her bedroom walls. They depict alt-rock bands, artistic films, indie games, and cartoon characters. She then looks at the toys that occupy her bed and closet. Fire suddenly burns within her eyes, her hands tense, and her teeth grit before ripping off every single poster and discarding her toys.

“Why am I doing this?! Why am I doing this?! It's like my brain is trying to tell me to stop liking the things I like!”

The noise awakens her parents, and they rush to her door.

“Ellie, what’s the matter?” the father asks in deep concern.

They oversee the ruins of what used to be their daughter’s personal fiefdom and a broken Ellie in between them.

The mother grips her shoulder to shoulder, asking, “What happened? Why is your room-”

Yes, why indeed?

The autism cure was meant to eliminate quirks and tics so that the patient could fit conventional America's standards. But the procedure did its job too well because Ellie now feels something inside her is missing, a piece of her soul lost forever.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me,” Ellie quietly admits.

Her father has a convenient solution.

“Ellie, don’t worry,” he dismissively replies. “This is a new experience for you. You’ll gradually accept being normal as soon as you go to bed.”

He wraps off the bandages on her head, revealing only stitches.

“See, now you look even more normal.”

Ellie sighs and steps one foot on the bed while her parents quietly exit. Do their words stop her burdens? No. She experiences a nightmare where she finally meets her childhood heroes, the X-Men, outside her window. But instead of politely introducing themselves to her, the brusque Wolverine is the first to talk.

“You ain’t one of us anymore. You ain’t special. You’re just a normie.”

The entire team joins in the taunting.

“Normie! Normie! Normie!”

Ellie wakes up at her usual time, though the dream haunts her throughout breakfast. Afterward, a knock is heard on the door.

“Is Ellie here?”

It's one of her elementary school friends.

They currently have special needs since their parents are tolerant of neurological differences. Hannah Long the Down Syndrome girl loves watching her turtles race across the

backyard. Eugene Willems the Asperger's boy roleplays as a reporter for his family's daily activities. Finally, Nina Huercas the ADD kid prefers watching movies with no dialogue and picture books with no words. What they all have in common is a love for a relatively normal activity: chalking the roadside pavement with, well, chalk.

When her mother opens the door and asks, “Are you one of her friends?”, the knocker is revealed to be Hannah, ironically the happiest looking of the three despite her deformity.

"Yes, my name is Hannah Long. Can Ellie come and play with us?"

“You’ll have to ask her,” she cooly answers.

The mother is not a fan of special needs children and prefers her daughter to hang out with neurotypical ones, yet she is nice enough not to smack the door rudely. Hannah waits while Ellie approaches the exit. She notices the stitches on her head but doesn't care.

“Hi. Can you play-”

“I heard you the first time. Not really.”

Such a blunt reply creates a disturbing air of silence.

“…Okay, well, what about tomorrow after school? The neighbors allowed more spa-”

“I said *no*.”

Now, Ellie’s voice is akin to a member of Gen Alpha, distracted by his app-surfing by a concerned, gym-experienced parent. Hannah still presses her luck.

“Next week…please? I don’t care that you’re not Autistic anymore. You’re still our friend.”

Her grin looks as forced as it would on any other Down Syndrome kid, yet she's sincere. Anyone can tell Hannah's hoping the answer will change. Unfortunately, Ellie is just as sincere in shoving an anvil down her throat.

“Didn’t you hear me the first two times?! I don’t wanna play with you freaks! Not next week, not next month, not ever!”

The silence is brought back with Ellie's intense eyes focused on her former friend's shocked face. Said shock melts into a tearful broken face, and she retreats to the next block while bawling. Suddenly, Ellie’s anger transitions into bewilderment.

“Freak? Did I just call her…a freak?”

However, the alienation continues when she reenters the house as she now decides not only to stop identifying with the special needs community but stop associating with them altogether. People who remain with autism, ADD, and Down Syndrome now look alien to her in a way that German kids who grew up during the Third Reich saw their Jewish fellows.

Nothing helps Ellie other than being dropped from special education the next day. The friends she made there now lack a core to their apple, a battery to their phone charge, a spoke to their wheel. And what Ellie currently lacks in friends, she spends more time with her family, a family that's still very controlling.

When Ellie once desired to play with her old, relatable companions, she's now pushed into making new ones, friends either “cured”

days after her or never related to neuroatypical conditions.

When she once wanted to visit idiosyncratic locales like the World's Largest Bucket of Fried Chicken or the Kitchen Utensil Emporium, she's now drawn to more conventional attractions like the Smithsonian and the National Mall.

When Ellie used to buy tickets for sparsely occupied alt-rock band performances, she's now persuaded into joining larger music conventions where strobes and crowds no longer burden her.

When shows like Sesame Street were her cup of tea, they're now taken away from her in exchange for newer flavors, conventional, exclusive cartoons that disregard or at least hush-hush about neurodiversity. When Ellie used to relate to X-Men comics because they embrace difference, she's now pushed towards “everyman” heroes such as Spider-Man.

And when she once pushed for a career as a creative writer, her parents now sway her toward more “realistic” jobs like medicine.

Perhaps, they said, she could lead the effort in reforming America's psychological demographic.

Already, within days since her cure, thousands of parents have been convinced by the poster child on the static color screen, and they've sent their children to lose a frustrating yet essential part of themselves. Like a neutered, sexually active dog or a bowl of tongue-searing jalapeños cooled down by a sop of milk.

And the remainder? The few left in the special needs community who adamantly refuse to compromise their individuality for the sake of "normalcy"?

Sooner or later, they will be targeted by state and federal governments not just with discrimination and acts of violence but with coercion. Sooner or later, just like with deafness, just like with blindness, just like with muteness, just like with retardation, there will be mandates that require every Autistic man, woman, and child to receive the cure. It doesn't matter if families less fortunate or conservative than the Naganos will suffer the pain of indoctrination and high prices. It doesn't matter if formerly Autistic individuals will still be paraded as pariahs just

for the stitches around their heads. Americans will still fall through.

Welcome to the beginning of the end of the Age of Neurodiversity.

My Experience as a Shapeshifter

Who am I? What am I? Why has my life changed so much?

Everyone has asked those questions before. Everyone has had a crisis of identity, confusion over where they belong in the world, whether during childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. I'm not everyone. Paradoxically, I am. It isn't just my mind that's complicated, it's my body. Ever heard of Mystique? I'm the real-life version of her, and no one but me knows. Don't giggle. This is true. I'm a shapeshifter from your world, not a fictional one. The difference between me and Mystique, aside from opposing ethics, is that my powers have limits and hers don't.

How did I come to this point? What triggered my powers? Why do I feel the need to tell you this? Well, the funny thing is, I don't know where this power came from. All I know is my first use of it was subconscious.

For almost my entire life, from my high school to post-college years, I had body issues that came from my meager, unimpressive appearance. My face was puffy and melon-shaped, my arms and legs were stalky like tree branches, my hair was raggedy like a

prostitute from an ‘80s movie, my belly was bloated, and my clothes were cheap, often second-hand from my older sisters after they’ve worn out of them. Not to mention, I wasn’t very well endowed. In other words, not only was I the black sheep of my family but also the ugly duckling in every school I attended. No one wanted to date a scrawny, unassuming Chicana from the poor side of Huntington. I tried online dating, even faking social media accounts to glamorize my appearance, but my parents didn’t allow that.

“Romantic relationships have to be in-your-face,” they argued. “Hiding behind a computer screen is nothing short of cowardice.”

Their generation had a different set of values than mine. My parents didn’t grow up with the Internet. They didn’t grow up with email. They didn’t grow up with the concept of blind dates. And thanks to their rigid mindsets, my envy over other women’s bodies festered like a never satisfied monster. If plastic surgery alleviated such problems, my parents forbade it. Whether it was breast implantation or liposuction, they regarded body augmentation as unnatural.

“Embrace your inner beauty,” Mama used to say. “You look perfect just the way you are.”

Perfect, huh? Not compared to my ever-fortunate sisters.

They resembled goddesses and were always salivated over by boys in school. My life was shit, and it took until the third year of college for my life to turn around. After the first day of sociology class, Jordan approached me. A man who looked almost as unassuming with acne dotting his face, shrimpy limbs, and an embarrassing hairstyle alongside a pitiful voice, asked if I would accept a date from him.

“I don’t care that you’re not pretty compared to the rest of the campus,” he remarked. “Personally, I’m not very attractive either. So that means we’re meant for each other, right?”

It took some hesitancy to answer back, and I had to ask my parents if he was right for me. Eventually, I accepted.

Despite fear and worry, my first date was perfect. His eyes were positioned at me the entire time, he didn’t stammer, and even as his teeth munched into hamburger meat and fried potato skin, he carried a

conversation on his likes, dislikes, and hobbies while allowing me to provide the same. Our relationship soon blossomed. Even after I moved to a new place, we kept in touch, Jordan working at a shoe store and me at a grocery just doors away.

For the next two years, we shared a commonality in humor, movies, and food. Often when the mayor of Huntington promoted a community dance, Jordan prompted me to join in. We would show the whole town that love didn't need to be between attractive people. Other times, whether at his house or mine, we would embrace under the covers.

"I'm not very well-endowed myself," he once admitted with an air of honesty. "So why would I care that your body isn't smoking hot to the rest of the world? You're perfect just the way you are."

It was bizarre that I could hear my mother say almost the exact same words, and I asked him to never utter them again. Still, the intercourse sessions were exciting, and my only concerns were STDs and pregnancy before wedlock.

After two years, I wanted to marry the unlikely man of my dreams. He was the first

person to ever make me truly happy since the start of my puberty. In fact, on our last night together, Jordan proposed to me, carrying a four-carat diamond ring the entire time. Had I accepted, the next four years of my life would've been a bed of roses. But I didn't. I didn't because, for the first time in two years, his eyes were directed not at me but at more attractive women. Women coming in and out of a fancy Italian bistro wearing stiletto heels, ruby lips, and ornate dresses that didn't conceal their softball-sized curves, their penny-bouncing asses, or their sporty legs and arms. I could see his distracted eyes glazed around every area that was not in front of me. When I called him out, this double-crossing pervert tried to dodge blame like a fly dodging water balls by an archerfish.

"Babe, you're talking crazy. I would never betray you like that. You know how I prefer a gal with personality rather than looks."

Even when I pointed my finger at his eyes, Jordan lamely dragged his feet and retorted, "I must've been looking at those mouth-watering meals being carried to the tables. You know how I love Italian, Yolanda. Even the mere sight distracts me. I can't help it."

I couldn’t help it either. I couldn’t help the urge to raise myself from my seat and storm out of the restaurant in tears – before the dishes were emptied, let alone before the receipt was sent. Looking back, I regret that moment. I must’ve misunderstood his intentions. He must’ve been heartbroken. It didn't help that COVID lockdowns happened the next day, making it harder for us to keep in touch.

And as punishment for such a blunder, I spent the next two years alone in a grimy apartment a town away spending time in self-hatred. I used to simply go online and wrap my eyes around images of sexy women, but two years ago, my computer broke down, and I was in such financial straits that I didn’t bother to repair it or buy a new computer. For the rest of my life, I not only bounced from job to job. purchased magazines and poured through every cover featuring an athlete, beach babe, supermodel, or actress. As creepy as it may be, I caressed the photographed figures for the hope that I would be like them. But my powers weren’t unleashed yet. No, it took until I truly hit the hard road recently.

A slouched, overweight man named Pat Skint was hired by the manager of a pet shop as a co-assistant. Just like Jordan, he was

attracted to average women. The only difference was his revulsive lust. The first time, Skint tried to grope me when no one was looking. I told him to back off. The second time, I threatened to call the cops. And when he attempted to grope me in the backdoor area, where supplies were hauled off, it was the last straw.

What was my reward for reporting that gluttonous creep to the manager? I was fired. No seriously, I was fired from the solid, joyful job I had since I moved out of Huntington.

I love animals: cats, dogs, fish, hamsters, parrots, especially mice, diminutive, unassuming mice. I relate to their unpopularity, and I bet if they could talk, the mice could relate to me. How dare I lose my job just because I allegedly violated the store's Employee Relations Code! I thought reporting on sexual harassment was a fine loophole, especially in the age of #MeToo, but I guess not. The cabrón kept his job, and now I was unemployed, more desperate for a makeover than ever before.

Why couldn't I sue the manager for wrongful termination, you ask? Simple: I wasn't going to fight for a lost cause. If he

fired me for whistleblowing a crime, he didn't deserve me.

As for why I didn't reach other options to prettying myself:

Gym? Didn't feel like it.

Plastic surgery? Too expensive.

Barbershop? There wasn't one in miles.

And I couldn't view the TV for answers when it would just advertise all the above or, worse, pointless therapy. Now, I wasn't just staring at magazine covers enviously, I was comparing my body to them.

Off with my tennis shoes, off with my plaid jacket, off with my black tank top, off with my denim jeans, off with my undergarments.

In front of the bathroom mirror, I wanted to see how much more pathetic I looked in the nude. Coincidentally, I wasn't feeling hungry for dinner and was ready to take a shower. Had I done so right away, I would've washed away that bad day. Instead, I convinced myself it was my lack of sex appeal that cost me my job. If only my cheeks were less flabby, if only my limbs had more muscle,

if only I grew a few inches, if only my assets were more prominent, if only my hair was straight or at least, not a wreck. Like that woman on one magazine cover: Gabriela Torres.

I knew nothing about her other than she was a pop singer who often doubled in Victoria's Secret ads. And the cover was a full-body embrace with a transparent bra and thong and a seductive smile.

Be her, be her, the magazine spirit whispered to me as it stood against the wall, on top of the sink, and next to the bathroom mirror. *You know you want to.*

As if subconsciously, switching my eyes between my miserable physique and the statuesque example on print, I slowly began to witness my body morphing. My skin jiggled and shifted from my legs, face, and stomach to other parts of the body. The fat in my face and my stomach shrunk while my cups inflated, and the density of my limbs grew thicker and thicker. But that was not all. My hair gradually rewired itself into a wavy but clean ocean current without any need for a barber, my eyes turned a vibrant yellow-green without any contact lenses, my nose contorted into a slenderer shape, my lips became wider, and

even my skin softened like a cup of expresso doused in cream.

After ten minutes, I was a spitting image of Gabriela Torres, only still as short as ever and lacking red fingernails, eyeliner, and a black spider tattooed on her left breast. It took me a while to realize the law of mass conservation was at play. I couldn't create matter to expand my height or spawn a transparent bra and thong nor could I destroy matter to recreate Torres' missing right pinky either. But my immediate thoughts were those of pain and panic.

Don't believe what comics or movies or TV shows or video games tell you, shapeshifting isn't a picnic. What I experienced was excruciating, as if I was receiving multiple plastic surgeries all at once. Even though I winced through most of the pain, my defenses collapsed, and I fell on my chest when I felt my glutes pulsating and inflating.

Why would anyone else want that kind of power if they're left screaming?

And believe me, I was screaming. Not just during the process but afterward.

What happened to me? What happened to my face? My body?

I only thought about being someone more tantalizing. I didn't expect my dreams to actually come true. I blinked a few times to make sure I wasn't hallucinating. When that didn't work, I showered, hoping that the water, soap, and body wash could rinse away the fogginess in my eyes. Sure, I felt the silkiness of my hair, the heaviness of my breasts, and the build of my arms and legs but as soon as I emerged with a soaking body, sans a towel covering everything below my armpits, reality would be restored.

What happened an hour ago was simply my sore eyes playing tricks on me, I told myself.

But as the fog cleared from my vision, I could still see Gabriela Torres looking back at me, her head, her arms, her legs, even her ample cleavage peeking from the towel. I immediately yelped in fear, and the towel fell, exposing bountiful genitals which could distract any man who would've walked into my apartment. This wasn't my imagination. I just shifted into a new form. I was like a real-life Mystique. And as I plucked my face, stretched my arms, felt my hips and legs, and fondled

my assets, I realized how sexy I looked. Alas, I couldn't keep it.

What if my landlord found out? Or the other tenants? They shouldn't see me like this. I'm not Gabriela Torres, the pop singer and Victoria's Secret model. I'm Yolanda Guevara, a miserable little mink who was recently fired from a decent job.

"Who the hell are you?"

This came from a grumpy, red-haired woman who looked like she was in her seventies. I was afraid I was going to be found out so I adapted.

"I'm Yolanda's sister. She invited me over to her place. As for the screaming you heard, we were watching a scary movie together."

The TV was off the whole time, yet that didn't matter. If she didn't realize I was wearing the body of a pop singer, she would not pay attention to a smaller detail like that.

She carelessly ended the conversation with, "Whatever. Just tell her to turn the volume down next time. My evening is being ruined."

The door closed.

Thank G-d.

It was too close of a call, but the only lucky one I'll get. I tried to turn myself back despite the pain. After all, in fiction, all it took was concentration. Shapeshifters weren't locked in forms; they just had to think hard to retain them. However, I learned the hard way once I became one person, I couldn't become another, not even myself unless I had a visual. Fortunately, I possessed countless photos in my apartment. Some were simply portraits for Picture Day in my high school years while others were full-body scales of important milestones like graduating from college or having a day at SeaWorld. Alas, the only pictures where everything below my neck wasn't concealed were those featuring my ex-boyfriend. I knew they served as painful memories, but they were the best times of my life. The only time since puberty I could embrace who I am. Therapy couldn't do shit to me in the past several years despite half-hearted attempts.

Thus, I returned to the bathroom mirror, placed a picture of us sharing a dance at the community ice rink against the sink wall, and concentrated. Painfully and slowly, cocoa

returned to my irises, my hair lost its silkiness, my nose reverted to its former hooked shape, the skin darkened, and body fat was transferred from my glutes to my cheeks. Yet I decided to revert myself no further. I wanted to keep my ample breasts and tree-like arms and legs. I was comfortable with most of my altered physique, and I didn't want to look scrawny or pathetic any longer. The only concern was whether or not I could squeeze into a bra the next day.

This would only be the first of many issues I would discover in my new life.

Sure enough, after enjoying a good night's sleep without any pipe dreams about the body I wished I had, I picked one up from a cabinet next to my bed and tried to strap it on my back. No matter how hard I pushed, it was like a belt buckle: impossible to fit. The next bra broke like a zipper.

And the third attempt?

Well, I succeeded in connecting the straps.

But you know how shrunken jeans are like a polymer anaconda around your waist?

Well, this AA cup bra didn't agree with my new bust length, and I gasped hard with every heave from my clearly squeezed cleavage. Quickly removing it must've been the same relief as a white-collar worker unraveling his necktie after every exhaustive day, yet I had a difficult choice: Shrink my babies back to where they were the day before or shop for a C cup. On one hand, I didn't want to go through the hassle of purchasing more clothes with what little money I had since unemployment. Not to mention, what if my landlord or the other tenants saw me with these honkers I clearly didn't possess before?

But on the other hand, why shouldn't I keep them? I told myself. *No longer would I be jealous of the alluring physiques of other women now that I have my own. I could also land a job as a fashion model and earn lucrative bucks wearing lingerie and skin-tight gowns. Besides, plastic surgery is always a good excuse to evade questions.*

Obviously, I didn't simply wear a plaid shirt and tank top. Nipples would still poke through. It was a good thing I possessed a heavy jacket anytime I needed to go outside during cold or rainy days. As eyebrow-raising as that would be on a warm, sunny day, I would've rather looked embarrassing than be

kicked out of whatever store I was shopping in or arrested for indecency.

As soon as I returned to my apartment with my new C-cup supporting bra, though, that problem didn't matter anymore. I could now embrace my beauty out in the public, cleavage window or no cleavage window. I could truly be a new woman like my parents and sisters wished I would be. Yet, before I could apply for a fulfilling rebirth of my work life, there were questions sizzling in my mind: Where did my powers come from? Why, when all times before, my imagination didn't bear fruit can I now become someone else just with a visual reading? Was this a blessing from G-d?

I wasn't a strong believer, but if I couldn't find an answer on Earth, it had to come from the Almighty. A radio commercial conveniently played during my drive to grab groceries.

"Have you ever felt worms in your stomach? Do you inexplicitly vomit yellow bile with no explanation? Is your head woozy like you've just been poisoned? If you say yes to any of these questions, then head on down to St. Nathaniel's Hospital and get treated by Dr.

Lauren Yost, a respected expert on viruses, toxins, and biological diseases."

I had to go there. Even if I didn't know who Dr. Yost was, even if I was unfamiliar with the medical clinic, I desperately wanted answers.

Where else could I turn to?

Little did I know I would find not answers but the biggest mistake in my life.

My troubles began when I spotted the location of Dr. Yost's medical clinic on the GPS, turned the car around, and drove three miles south. There, I waited for twenty minutes smelling the scent of burnt coffee, hearing cries of upset children and complaining parents, and staring at the drab white walls. Hell, when I got to reception, I had to pay so freakin' much in advance and I lied about my condition, citing a skin parasite that wormed around my body. It was a disgusting and excruciating tactic, but the pain and screams were enough to catch the busy doctor's attention.

"Come on in, I'll see what I can do about that parasite."

I didn’t know what she looked like until now. I expected an older woman in her fifties or sixties, but I didn’t expect her to have the appearance of someone twenty years younger, right down to the blue nail polish. There were still signs of age such as silver strands of hair and a diploma on the wall labeled “PhD in Medicine, Rhode Island College 1991”. Even the music was old. I never heard this singer before, but the audio blaring through the room suggested a black soul artist. I didn’t need to comment on it, though. I just needed to drop the lie and confess my real intentions.

“I need to know if I’m a mutant or not.”

“What?”

That’s a natural response. Anyone would say the same.

They might’ve also responded with, “Are you playing a joke? Are you on drugs? Do you need to go to the loony bin?”

However, she said none of those things as if sheer professionalism prevented her from blurting out what was on her mind; she just wildly stared for five seconds and asked again what I was there for. Repeating the question solved nothing, so I decided to demonstrate

my talent by darting my eyes straight at hers and changing shape.

My skin darkened cocoa as did my lips, my irises collected hazel and disposed of brown, my hair lost some sheen, my skin became slightly wrinkled, my ears hung closer to my sides, my hair turned wavy, my cheeks thinned once again and the lost fat was transferred to my glutes. Even my bust shrank a cup size while my arms and legs became slightly thicker and more muscular. Dr. Yost was for sure an attractive woman of her age and her limbs displayed athleticism, but she's not Victoria's Secret quality.

By the end, I resembled the doctor I came to see, only four inches shorter, wearing casual clothes, and neither sporting eyeliner nor nail polish. Dr. Yost looked horrified during my transformation; who wouldn't if they heard the painful screams and the sight and sound of skin jiggling and moving and my hair reconfiguring itself?

It's like watching someone horrifically transform into a werewolf. And afterwards, she shrieked. Had it not been for me clasping my hand on her mouth, I might've been exposed.

Who knew what nurses would've done if they found doubles in the same office?

No doubt the "twin" excuse would've flown back at my face. Dr. Yost would've disputed it, and no one else was seen entering the office just earlier.

Would I be indicted for impersonation? Persecuted across town like a witch? Abducted for government experimentation?

I didn't want to experience the same treatment someone like Mystique went through. At the same time, I didn't want to be left with one of the greatest mysteries in the world. It was fortunate that the room was soundproof so there was time for the doctor to calm down and for me to convince her that I meant no harm – in my voice, not hers.

"Wait, why don't I sound like you?" I quickly asked

This wasn't the first time I spoke in another form, but I had never seen Gabriela Torres outside of magazines and pop songs I did hear on the radio, her voice was similar to mine, only with a Colombian accent.

Dr. Yost was just as creeped out, yet she was sympathetic enough to explain things to

me; first, she pointed out our height difference.

“Ever heard of the law of conservation of mass?” I skipped physics; she didn’t. “Your skin can’t stretch any further than anatomy allows. That’s why you will remain the same height and weight.”

Yost ordered me to step into a platform with a giant height measure behind it.

“5’8 and 185 pounds, no matter the form. And as far as your voice.” It took time for Dr. Yost to think of a suitable answer, but I could see an invisible lightbulb blinking in her head. “If your skin isn’t stretching, neither are your bones. And if your bones aren’t affected, nothing else inside your body is. That includes vocal cords.”

In other words, I had to hide my voice if I needed to talk to someone in another body. Then, she asked what other limitations my powers had. The first question was whether I shared someone else’s fingerprints or my own. We compared the grooves on our fingers; mine wasn’t altered. If there was a situation where I had to use fingerprints to gain access to classified information or a room that’s meant

for another person, I would fail miserably. The next request was much more embarrassing.

“Could you change into a man?”

I felt annoyed.

Making myself more attractive or looking older is one thing but genderbending? Do you know how much effort it takes?

Besides, I was already in enough pain shifting my skin, face, and hair into someone over twenty years older. I wanted to simply return to the body I owned before the appointment. But Dr. Yost promised that the investigation of my powers would proceed smoothly if I tested my limits to their fullest potential.

Did I have a magazine with me? No.

Did the doctor? No.

I didn’t even own a smartphone. What was available was a picture of Yost with her husband. Strong, well-aged beyond his years, confidant, resembling a philanthropist. Another was of her son, graduation cap, gown, and diploma in hand. He looked baby-faced in comparison. Tough choice. Neither picture showed much skin outside of head and hands

and both were relatives of my doctor. She would be just as freaked out as me, and I hesitated to appear as one of them, let alone in feminine clothing. Still, I had no other option, and between the two, the picture with the more formfitting clothing was more appropriate. Thus, after being permitted to strip off all my clothing so my body would have a better visual read, the transformation began.

First, the weight of my breasts flattened, and I became barrel-chested. Then, the fat was transferred to my nose, once hooked and now bulbous. My arms and legs thickened, my irises turned a brilliant cocoa, my jaws became meatier, and my hair was textured like salt-and-pepper. But no more. I collapsed over how much energy I exerted and had to be raised from the ceramic floor as if I were a toddler. The stifled sound of laughter echoed through my reformed ears.

Dr. Yost was trying to restrain her amusement, even saying “Apologies for such unprofessionalism. I just didn’t think you would look like that.”

I turned to a mirror in the office to discover the source. I looked like the doctor’s husband alright - if Frankenstein recreated him from spare parts.

His hair was short with the texture of a bush, yet mine remained long and wavy. His face on the picture grew whiskers, yet mine didn't. He sported an Adam's Apple, yet mine didn't. And where should've been a one-eyed snake and two balls between my legs remained my sex's curse. I resembled a Motley Crue musician only partway through gender reassignment surgery. I should've known better than to assume I could transmute my skin to such a complex degree. But in my eyes, the only reason why my genitals didn't change was that the picture depicted pants covering his private area.

If I couldn't get a visual read on the inside of clothing, how would replicating every body part be accurate?

Fortunately, Yost, with her computer ready, typed in pictures of her grandchildren on a photo album, one of them being the newborn Levon coddled and wearing a birthday suit.

"It might not be much," she declared. "But see if you can replicate his wiener. I promise the embarrassment will be brief."

How did the doctor know I could morph individual body parts, you ask?

Well, earlier, I told her what brought about my powers, what was the first form I took, and that the physique I strutted around in for the past day was not entirely my own. I wasn't afraid to confess that my pillowy bust, hourglass waist, and nimble arms and legs were assets of a sexy pop singer and Victoria's Secret Model. What I couldn't confess was the breaking point, the sexual harassment case at the pet shop. It's too personal of a matter to discuss with the doctor.

Imagine being heart-to-heart with a McDonald's clerk about your sins against man and G-d.

No matter the extent of my abilities, the skin in my vagina did nothing more than jiggle. It wasn't twisting, it wasn't turning, it wasn't reshaping. In fact, from all that strain, I only ruptured my pubic area and collapsed on the floor in a pool of blood. I only had enough to use my ID card to restore my skin and plain but feminine head and scan a picture of what I presumed to be Dr. Yost's daughter before my vision melted into blackness.

The next moment, I woke up on a bed, hearing the beeps of a heart monitor, breathing from some kind of apparatus and feeling something attached to my arm. Then, I

noticed doctors huddling around me to explain that I've been unconscious for five days and Yost carried me to the infirmary to have my vagina stitched up before I died of blood loss. They also told me I might need to buy pain medication for the next few months until the wound fully recovered. I uncovered the sheets beneath my gown.

Bandages. Bloody bandages between my legs.

This was my consequence for defying the forces of nature. Shapeshifters can't change from female to male or vice versa, only in between. My backup plan of becoming a prostitute if I failed at modeling flew out the window. No one would want to make love with a mutilated vagina, no matter how sexy my other assets might be.

At least, when the doctors left, my scan worked. I pulled the length of my gown, and I could see the plumpness of my breasts and the girth of my waist, just like in the photo. And even as I waited hours to regain my stamina from blood injecting needles, I was approached by Dr. Yost, melancholy in her eyes.

“I’m sorry for you ending up like this. I didn’t expect-

“I don’t blame you,” I replied. “I should’ve not let myself be goaded like this. Now, look at me.”

She glanced at my muscular body and concluded, “You look like my late daughter.”

“Late?” I asked, confused over the statement.

She told me her daughter Valerie was an accomplished swimmer who partook in competitions across the state yet body envy and depression ended her life. Maybe that’s why Dr. Yost was so considerate of me. I reminded her of a loved one she lost, body and soul. Her mood switched like a whip.

“You need to rest for a bit, since you’ve just recovered from surgery, but when you feel like yourself again, just know: I’ve tested a sample of your blood while you were under anesthesia. Come back to the office after your recovery. The results may surprise you. And don’t worry about paying for the operation, I’m letting you off with a light check.”

Instantly, I trusted her. The doctor didn’t report my secret to the rest of the hospital,

she didn’t report me to the police, she put doctor-patient privilege before all else. Funny, and I thought professional-client relationships only existed between therapists and patients.

After removing the breathing apparatus, pulling the IV from my arm, and filling my stomach with a prepared sandwich and water bottle to relieve my hunger and thirst, I prepared to exit the rancid pine-scented room and recovering my form-fitting clothes only to be given a cane so I wouldn’t trip over myself. Despite my recovery, the pain in my vagina also damaged my mobility. In other words, every step freakin’ hurt. And I discovered back in the pleasant, sugar cookie-scented office did indeed surprise me. From the microscope Dr. Yost introduced me to, the cells looked normal. The DNA looked normal. Every molecule looked…normal.

If there was anything irregular, neither of us noticed. Superhero fiction lied to me like a cheating lover, yet I didn’t relent in my quest for answers. Perhaps, there’s a foreign substance in my organs or a chemical I ingested that made my body more malleable.

Plopping on a surprisingly comfy metal chair, I requested an X-Ray scan. Perking her

bifocals, Dr. Yost replied with abject confusion.

“I’ve already analyzed your blood and tissue. An X-Ray isn’t going to reveal any more-”

I grabbed a fistful of extra dollars and dropped it in her hands before she could finish her sentence. Trust for trust.

Did the results change? No.

The X-ray scans whizzed over the machine. Every bone and internal organ looked normal. No foreign objects. No splinters. No malformations aside from my reconstructed vagina. Nothing science could prove. This was all a work of G-d. He imbued me with the attribute to change my form without altering my genes. After every other explanation failed, this is the only plausible one.

But why? Why take pity for my body envy now? I have been living with this depression since I was twelve, and every daydream up to yesterday had only been an illusion.

Why can’t I alter the length of my hair? Why can’t I morph my vagina into a less

burdensome dick? Why can't my skin stretch in any way I want? Why does my fat have to be transported from one area to another? Why can't I alter my voice? Why do I have to constantly carry an ID card everywhere I go to remind my body what I once looked like? Why the pain, effort, and exhaustion? Why limit my powers in the first place?

Those questions clouded my mind when I was escorted out of the clinic in a wheelchair and when I drove back to my apartment, when I took the elevator (I gave my landlord the excuse that I broke my leg on a curb), and when I emptied the freezer and dined on an eggplant enchilada and a bowl of banana ice cream. And when I stripped off my clothing to prepare for another shower, I had mixed feelings.

On one hand, the physique I gained from Yost's photographed daughter, while not as pronounced as Gabriela Torres, was still attractive enough, especially with the muscles on my arms, legs, and abs. I could double as an athlete if my fashion career puttered out. Yet, some discomfort entered my head over the fact that my assets belonged to a dead person. At the same time, I refuse to revert them once more. If this had to be my physique, I would carry it for the rest of my life. But I

looked down at the bandages covering my entire vagina and the dried blood that remained like faded marker on a cubby wall, and my lips hung even lower than before.

How could I ever hope to find a new soulmate if he's repulsed by these scars? And what if he didn't? The stitches could be ripped out, the skin could open again, and blood could pool out of an already soiled bed. I would need to tape a "No penetration allowed" sign to my pubic area.

It didn't help that I had to wash myself with cold water or else release painful hot stings from my vagina. And when I had to take off my bandages to go to the bathroom, I could not only feel a pain somehow worse than my monthly period but notice how many stitches I actually had, fragmenting my nether regions like a jigsaw puzzle. I was at the point of suicide.

Not caring at all about doing other things like going grocery shopping or paying early rent, I sat on my bed and decided to rest until my mind would become clear.

I would find the solution to my problems the next day.

Cue next day: Despite my hope, it didn't start out well.

My sleep, my shower, and my breakfast were haunted by stressful questions and anxiety over my future:

How can I get used this radical change? How can I move on from the trauma at the clinic? Where's my life headed?

And whether I was shopping at the grocery store or applying for health insurance renewal, my mind was troubled by horny onlookers who wanted a piece of my shit or an invitation to my hooters. Even the landlord, who usually made no comments about my appearance, started eying me leerily as he demanded rent.

Sure, I should've expected such reactions from transforming my body to be more aesthetically appealing but I didn't expect it to be so intense. I was haunted by memories, dark memories that I thought were buried; I needed therapy. Forget trying out modeling or sports, my head had to be set straight first. And it wasn't going to come from psychiatric pills. Believe me, they only worked for a while during my early years of self-hatred before magazines became my new drug.

Besides, I've already been taking prescription for my pain; thanks to my vaginal scars and the stress of shapeshifting, I've needed to consume two tablets a day to endure the pain.

No, the real answer had to come from Dr. Emile Weisman.

For weeks since my breakup with Jordan, I consulted his advice on how to move from my grief and reclaim self-esteem, but the sessions never sank in. His advice was too conventional, too predictable, too "I've read studies and…"

Weisman really didn't know me; he didn't know how to adapt around me. I hoped his practices would improve four years later considering he's the only psychiatrist around for miles.

Sure enough, when I entered Dr. Weisman's mental health clinic, things had changed. The walls may've still been a drab aquamarine plastered with quotes from random psychologists and philosophers, but what I didn't expect was being approached by a sandy, long-haired, three-legged chihuahua with a tongue sticking out and a navy-blue vest labeled "Morrigan: Therapy Dog".

Therapy dog? I thought. *Strutting around the clinic like it's his business? Shouldn't someone be carrying him?*

Except for the receptionist, no one was sitting or standing. The waitlist was extremely short and the only person who applied for an appointment before me was Cynthia Bo.

Dr. Weisman must be losing customers, I told myself.

I didn't care, though. I just stroked the dog's head and back eagerly. It was like I was back in The Pet Emporium, the pleasant parts at least. But when Cynthia exited and Morrigan ran towards the room, I knew who that dog belonged to.

Our reunion was quite a surprise. The last time I saw Weisman; he was hitting seventy and his receding hairline was like salt-and-pepper. Now, he's well into old age and every strand of silver has turned silver. Dr. Weisman almost resembled Grandpa Arturo in that respect. He, on the other hand, didn't recognize me because where I once looked plain, I reintroduced myself in the literal body of an athlete.

I recognized the room, though, with its orange sequined walls, shelves full of board

games and textbooks, and odor like raspberry jam. I could also still hear Classical music playing through the sound speakers along with the doctor's squeaky clean navy bloom uniform and trimmed glasses.

Immediately after taking a seat on a comfy sofa that looked like it was made from cashmere, I heard his first words in years:

"Hello, Miss-"

"Guevara. Yolanda Guevara," I urgently finished his sentence. "Sorry for not writing on the waitlist."

It took a moment for Weisman to respond, as if he was slowly piecing together the information.

"Guevara… I think I've heard a patient by that name. Have I seen you before?"

"Yes. Four years ago. I had plastic surgery since then. I've been working out too."

He sighed with an air of disappointment that I didn't embrace his body positivity advice, but I didn't give a crap. Unlike Dr. Yost, Weisman wasn't worthy enough to receive the truth. When I confessed my

problems, it was in a vague way that only inferred what really happened.

“Let’s say, I suddenly woke up one day and gained the power to turn into anyone I saw eye to eye, yet there are limits. I can’t change my size, I can’t spawn clothing, and I can’t turn from a woman to a man. What reason do you think G-d would’ve granted this to me with roadblocks?”

I knew he was a practicing Christian. I remember seeing him in church before I stopped attending. Only Weisman could combine his therapeutic skills with his religious beliefs to bring relief to those struggling with faith and life.

As he stroked Morrigan’s head on his lap, Weisman balked.

“What could ever bring up that question?”

Weisman’s tone delivered both shock and curiosity as if he truly wanted to know. I didn’t reach beyond telling him my vagina ruptured the other day and had been surgically stitched back together. The therapist’s mildly disgusted reaction was enough.

“Last night, I dreamt that my mutilated nether regions twisted to resemble a man’s. The rest of the day followed suit yet keeping all those alterations were too much and too limiting at once.”

I was distraught, partially because the thing between my legs was supposed to be disclosed only to me, other women, and physicians. Yet Dr. Weisman knew what my problem was.

“G-d is unknowable, and I haven’t observed any example of changing shape except in science fiction. But if that scenario does exist and is imbued by the Almighty, I think He has a reason.” Before continuing, he turned to his side to sneeze. “Most likely, He responded to your self-harm and self-hate and sent a special gift as pity. As for limits, well, G-d created everything in the universe including the conservation of mass. He probably wouldn’t want anyone to abuse this power. Such an unfathomable force must be checked.” He fixed his bifocals with determination and stroked Morrigan once more. “But who’s to say? The Lord is beyond our human understanding.”

That was one answer confirmed from his cracked lips. G-d might’ve intervened with my

life a day ago to teach a valuable lesson, though unless He stretched His head from heaven and talked to me face to face, I will never really know. Not that I mind the mystery.

Shapeshifting is like trying on a pair of high heels. It can be simultaneously pleasing and insufferable.

But what about the other question?

“Concerning your recent incident, if G-d still fits into the equation, He would say, ‘Don’t despair. If you can’t love sexually, you can still love spiritually. Romance is about the heart, not the body.’ I think everyone can understand that fact of life.”

It took a moment for me to accept his advice, but Morrigan’s ticking head and adorable face convinced me to not worry about a vagina that would eventually heal and wouldn’t be required for a romantic relationship. For the first time, I decided I didn’t need sex to make my future man happy. Pregnancy was off the table anyway. I didn’t want a potential child to inherit my powers, go through my pain, and put both of us in danger through sheer curiosity. Still, I promised to return next week for another one-hour session,

filling in my name and my session time (2:30-3:30 PM) in the sign-up sheet, and paying him $30. Whether or not I succeeded in modeling or athletics, I still needed his advice to persevere.

Did I succeed? Well, that's a story for another day. All I can say is: Look out world for Yolanda Guevara, the woman who can turn into anything she wants.

The Monsters' Halloween

Hello humans! My name is Horace Firestarter, and I am but a humble resident of Ghastly Hallows. We citizens take pride in our work. We set up the decorations, plan the festivities, girdle every house and street to make it just frightful enough. But many humans have come to us, asking, "Do you have any particular versions of traditions that would make you jump out of your skin?"

None of us have answered a striking question like that for so long. But today, I'm willing to spend my time telling you about our traditions. There are things that scare us that are completely harmless to your imagination; and there are things that chill your bones but are common occurrences to our lives.

Every November 30, the month after your Halloween, we have our own gatherings.

Instead of cobwebs, skeletons and other ghoulish props, we adorn our houses with bright, colorful trinkets. Say, paper cutout snowflakes or adorable mannequins of puppies and other baby animals.

We even play peppy music.

As for the Jack o' Lanterns, we use watermelons as the vessels of our carving arts rather than pumpkins. They're not only more colorful but are much easier to empty the pulp and seeds. You humans seem to prefer monstrous maws or fancy imagery of horror, but residents of Ghastly Hallows likes to keep things simple and cute: smiley faces, hearts, engravings of flowers and guinea pigs and hopeful messages.

Our haunted houses are bright and ordinary like your world but with various ghouls in human disguise prepared to disturb our senses. Nothing spooks us as serious as objects opposite to our beliefs, though costumes come close. Ghosts have a head start in using ordinary humans as clothes, but others must adapt. The vampires cap their teeth and pinken their skins, the werewolves cosplay as adorable companion dogs, the zombies wear concealing body suits, the mummies dress as the royalty they once were, the witches use glamor to appear beautiful

and discard their black robes for business suits or evening dresses. As for me, I'm a man of fire, someone who burns endlessly inside and out. So, ironically, I dress as a firefighter every year. The only reason why it doesn't melt is because my body is occasionally doused in water on the day of trick or treating.

Every year, our versions of exciting games are played: Pin the leg of a skeleton while blindfolded, bob in a polluted vat for rotting potatoes, bring in a noose so someone would be a literal hangman. Even the dance must be an emulation of what you practice at the prom, though with punch made from the blood of an adder and the compost of various bugs. And what you call horror movies does not apply to us. Innocent films like *Bambi* are no less delightful to our sense of Halloween than anything else.

Don't expect the assortment of candy to be any more innocent. Our delicacies are adhered towards honey glazed rat heads, chocolate-battered moth wings, and fish eyes preserved in hard sugar. Personally, my favorite treats every year has always been red-hot bat tongues. They set your mouth on fire so beautifully. Even better are the shrunken heads those delicate desserts are placed in.

Trick-or-treating is an all-ages activity. Adults enjoy it just as much as children do, and our experience is much more fun. The young simply demand “treats”, but older ones abide to the “trick” motto. Launching firebombs into the doorway, infesting every crevice of the house with creeps, scaring the residents out of their wits with the crudest of faces.

This is how Ghastly Hallows envisions Halloween - not with you human’s conventional outlook on scares or creeps and not even the recitation of horror stories has the same value you place on it. We do not mention blood or gore or creepy imagery to terrify the audience, but rather soft, fairy-tale type yarns that place the “monster” as the hero and the “human” as the villain.

There, I have answered how we citizens of Ghastly Hallows celebrate Halloween. Now, if you excuse me, I’m off for a winter siesta.

Noah: The Canine Hero of D-Day

June 6, 1994: It's a warm, sunny day when a man with silvery hair and a baggy face visits Aspin Hill Memorial Park near Washington DC, carrying a brown pebble in his knuckled hand and wearing a 49ers jacket, cargo pants, and beanie. Wrapped around his neck is a dog tag inscribed with his name and insignia: "Sgt. Shirley Mottentosh U.S. Army 11459". He kneels in front of the very reason he arrived at that place: a grave to "Noah, German at Birth, American at Heart September 8, 1942-June 6, 1944". The man tearfully smiles, places the pebble in front of the headstone and, just below a pawprint engraving, speaks to his beloved friend as though he was still among the living.

"Hey buddy, it's me, Shirley. I want you to know your sacrifice hasn't been in vain. The war is long over and your homeland is now our friend."

Twenty other veterans just as old as Shirley join in to offer their words of gratitude.

"Noah was my friend too," admits a paraplegic Cpt. Isaac Donnelly, himself wearing a dog tag and cargo pants but

distinguished by a polo shirt, a straw hat, and sunglasses. “I just didn’t realize until it was too late. He saved all our asses back in Normandy, remember?”

The rest nod in silent tribute as if guilty over such a traumatic event. Over a thousand died on the beaches of northern France, including many of their friends, and some have never gotten over such loss. Even their former commanding officer, despite surviving the battle in one piece, lost another to brain cancer five years ago. Still, the veterans collectively recall the story of how a brave war dog of hostile origin came into their lives.

On August 16, 1943, the 1st Infantry Division, wearing the same motley olive jackets, helmets, and pants since enlistment, engaged with the rear guard of Axis infantry before they could withdraw from Sicily; the enemy fought fiercely to cover the escape of their comrades, not concerned over the reality that the war has turned unfavorably towards them. On the last day of battle, Shirley’s battalion suffered heavily, with about half of the numbers collapsing from the guns of Germans and Italians. They managed to push through sheer will, killing hundreds and forcing the remainder to surrender. As a show of victory, they were allowed to not only take rations and weapons but seize the German

Shepherds used to sniff out political dissidents. Unfortunately, the majority were already dead by the end of the siege, either caught in the crossfire or shot in self-defense. Only one remained, shivering and whimpering in a bloodstained town square since it was the youngest of the pack.

Without asking any surrendering Germans for information, one soldier inspected the black-and-tan survivor, observing both its anatomy and size and confirming not only the dog's sex but his age. He was no more than a few months old, far from a capable war dog.

As a result, the commander of the 72nd Infantry Battalion, Lt. Col. Marvin Dee, contemplated killing him, reasoning that he was no good for fighting at such a young age.

However, Prv. Dale DaBloise intervened, arguing, "We can still turn that bastard against the Krauts. You wouldn't want to waste that opportunity, would you?"

When Dee still felt reluctant, Mottentosh, who had rarely spoken to anyone above his rank, came forward to provide a different rationale.

"We're not a death squad. We should practice mercy to those that don't mean harm

to us. Look at this dog again and tell us he deserves to lose his life."

He pointed to the German Shepherd, whose watery eyes and slight frown loomed over the soldiers innocently.

The battalion leader stared at his subordinate with menace in his eyes, only to sigh and insert a seized leather leash into the dog's collared neck.

"You belong to the Allies now, Kraut!" he venomously exclaimed. "But first, we have to change your name."

The collar tag displayed "Oskar", a moniker prevalent in the German-speaking world.

Dee asked for suggestions, and many came up with absurd answers like "Brownie" or "Whiner" or "Lil' German"; few desired a respectful name. As the only Jew in his battalion, Shirley blurted out "Noah", biting his lip hard as he did.

"It's biblically important if you ask me," he justified, sucking blood from the cut.

The rest shrugged, deciding that the name didn't matter as long as the German Shepherd served a useful purpose. Still, the commander snatched the dog tag with his firm

grip, etched out the name, and scribbled a new one on the unaltered back of the tag.

Through the next nine months, Noah was bound to the battalion, slowly growing up from a puppy to a fully developed dog. While Shirley treated him with compassion, his comrades regarded the dog as merely a tool to help dig out land mines or recover wounded troops. Often, they crafted comedic banter at Noah's expense, such as imitating his barks with a "heil" arm stretch.

One even joked, "What's the difference between a German Shepherd and a wolf? The latter is legally hunted."

Despite his Jewish background, Mottentosh couldn't hate Noah since he understood the tragedy of prejudice. In his eyes, just because the Germans - driven by glory and hate - once owned him didn't mean he would forever be like the rest; Noah could be better. Thus, from the moment the dog came into his squad's hands, Shirley functioned as the dog's unofficial owner, reconditioning him to regard Germans as the enemy and Allied forces as friends via teaching English words and commands.

Until the 1st Infantry Division was deployed to the British Isles to prepare for Operation Overlord, Noah and his human

comrades remained in Italy, this time clashing with German occupiers north of the surrendered kingdom. Throughout several battles in mountainous terrain, through rainstorms and strong winds, Noah proved himself by sniffing out mines, barking at danger and distracting enemy troops, but most of his crew refused to recognize such feats. Even those who didn't hate him were intimidated by the hierarchy and interacted with Noah with as much distance as one would a leper.

In fact, only Shirley ever rewarded him, delivering rubs, brushes, and strokes to Noah's brown and black back and sharing rations of beef, pork, and chicken every night instead of merely meat on the end of a bone. As a result of their companionship, Shirley's comrades often mocked him for taking care of a "Kraut mutt". The worst incident occurred near the end of the 1st Infantry Division's campaign in Italy when Cpl. Leonard Helensky, with a brawny physique and stubbled face, churlishly approached Shirley during a rest at a riverbank.

"I'm almost jealous of you," he sneered with a smile signifying hateful intention. "How does it feel finding kinship with that ugly beast, kikey?"

Predictably, Shirley retorted his comment with a lunge, throwing him and his opponent into the water like a jealous deer competing over a mate. Only by harsh reprimands from their NCO did the fiery anger cool down to a simmer, their faces bruised and bloodied by punching and kicking. Never again did insults and slurs trigger Mottentosh into losing his composure, partially thanks to Noah serving as a relaxer. At many points, he felt the urge to drink or dive into a state of depression, only to be interrupted by licking, sniffing, and panting. By the time Noah turned a year old, he was like a child wanting nothing but happiness for his “father”. No matter if Shirley were ill, malnourished, scared, or dying, the dog would always be there for him.

On November 5, 1943, after four months in Italy, the entire 1st Infantry Division was relocated to England to prepare for the Normandy landings. Not used to traveling on a cruiser and forced to stay in an enclosed space for animals, Noah developed anxiety and exhausted the trip with whines and yelps. It took Shirley volunteering to keep him company to soothe the dog’s distress. However, more important than that was to relieve his own distress, with the combination of seasickness and the trauma over witnessing horror on the Italian front driving him into

distancing from social interaction. In a room of darkness filled with rust and pungent odors, sharing his meals and bed and grooming his fur, Mottentosh confessed his life story towards a creature who would listen without criticism.

Born to a World War I veteran in Chicago, Shirley always wanted to own a dog, but his parents forbade him, considering pets to be no more than a frivolous waste of money. Even when he moved to Syracuse and married the woman of his dreams, troubling finances were more of a concern to him as he struggled from job to job. On the day Shirley enlisted in the armed services, though, he approached a Bavarian breeder and found a hound just as beautiful and elegant as Noah. If not for the decision to leave home and train in the army barracks, he would have lived with a cuddly companion for two years by the middle of the war.

Finishing his story over the course of a few days, Shirley was relieved that it was rewarded by frantic licks and electric wags of his roommate. No more would either of them feel alone, like a pariah without a home. However, there was the thought etching in his mind that Noah wouldn’t be suitable for life after combat for much longer. Noah was bred and raised by the German military and

transported to Sicily to serve as an instrument of terror. In other words, all he experienced through his entire life was war. Such a thought contributed to what Shirley would do next after finding safe harbor in Britain.

After a week of travel, the 72nd Infantry Battalion finally arrived on the shores of America's most trusted ally. Despite his kinship towards Noah, Shirley was granted permission by his commanding officer to sell him to countless British families over several days, believing that a pup shouldn't die in war. In an era where Germanophobia was rampant, no one - not poor, middle class, or upper crust - accepted him, not even after he was inspected of all filth and pathogens. Every time Shirley knocked on a door and asked, "Sir/Ma'am, can you accept this dog?", the disgusted resident(s) slammed the invitation shut. Thus, as though willed by the Almighty, Shirley was obligated to serve as replacement owner for the next seven months, and his bond with Noah deepened.

At a mess hall borrowed for the convenience of American and other comrades of the British, they ate side by side, Mottentosh sharing portions of soup, salad, and bread for his furry friend to scoff up. At camp, Noah was entertained by shadow puppets, improvised toys, and games

concocted by his human owner. And during the waning hours of the day, they slept on the same mattress, comforting each other amid nightmares, cantankerous noise, and the tormenting cold. No matter the derision or disgust by other humans, the relationship between the adopted German Shepherd and his human owner was so passionate it was like Noah had always been part of Shirley's life. There was only one area where they were apart: battle simulations.

During intense training, they participated in separate courses. Mottentosh learned to swim through deep water, crawl and crouch to avoid the torrent of artillery fire, and find adequate cover in the heat of battle. Noah, meanwhile, was taught how to pull injured troops to safety and lunge at the enemy. By the time his lessons were taught, the dog was nearly full-grown, and his teeth developed to maturity. However, it took time for him to switch his watery eyes to ones of fiery hate and his jaws from friendly smiles to vicious baring. For most of his life, Noah was never given the opportunity to attack anyone, only tasked with pursuing targets and digging out mines. As an incentive, blood sausages caked with soil were tied to the legs and arms of trainers, simulating the triggering smells of German machine gunners behind sand-

blanketed fortresses. Multiple sessions were failures, a consequence of test subjects cowardly fleeing from a potential attack or Noah pulling off the sausages from human bodies.

The poor results turned around on March 14, 1944, shortly after the day he reached maturity. He finally succeeded in the most daunting task of any war dog-in-training, and his innocence was sacrificed in the process.

This was a miracle, not only in the eyes of Shirley and his comrades but the entire country. No other war dog had ever been sent to England for training in one of the most ambitious campaigns of World War II, let alone one of German origin. British officials even questioned the battalion’s reasons for sending a dog to their land when the operation required no animal support. The justification that an animal aide could make surviving mines and artillery more probably was enough to persuade even the most dubious, though it would only be proven true by the reality of the campaign, not a simulation.

June 6, 1944: This was the day of his death and greatest feats of heroism. Noah was riding a landing craft next to his unofficial owner, awaiting destiny yet anxious and about

to succumb to fear. Like others, his breathing was labored, his eyes were scattershot, and there was a shivering sensation in his body that could only be calmed down by the stroking of a soft human hand. At the same time, the brush of Noah's tail against Shirley's camo trousers and the zealous panting of his drooling lips managed to calm his human owner. As for the rest, they tried to lighten the mood by joking that, if they overcame this deadly engagement with German artillery, they would earn the spoils in captured French chateaus. One even claimed, "Hell, we might even get a broad or two for saving their villages, am I right?"

As their boats floated closer towards the shore of Utah Beach, their sense of calm curdled. Not only was the already gloomy sky growing darker, not only was the smell of doom wafting through the air, but Czech Hedgehogs were becoming visible, their purpose being to stop any advance by armored vehicles. Noah faintly whimpered as if anticipating the bloodshed ahead, but - just before the troops were ready to deploy - Shirley rested his hand on the dog's back and asked, "Are you ready for the action, boy?" in an encouraging tone.

Just then, the hatches spun and opened near the beach, and all hell broke loose.

Machine gun fire shot through the darkness, tearing almost everyone inside the landing craft to mincemeat, through Noah survived by immediately diving underwater and encouraging his friend to join in. Below the surface were sinking mutilated bodies of the unfortunate along with the screams of the dying; they disturbed Shirley, who could only stare in blank horror before his furry companion pulled on his jacket to safety. Emerging on the invaded sands of Normandy, they noticed that it was already coated in thick scarlet residue as many soldiers who survived the swim to shore plopped on the beaches like salmon only to be riddled by rapid-fire bullets. Their only means of salvation were Czech Hedgehogs and bags bundled on top of each other that provided decent protection against the iron monsters.

While Shirley endured the sound of bullets tat-tat-tatting and sandblasting the beach around him, Noah decided to run back to the water. There were countless soldiers slowed down or drowning in the first phase of the landings. On his return dive, noise pounded his ears, and there was a struggle to pull a drowsy two-hundred-pound man back to shore. Despite Shirley's fears, Noah reemerged unscathed, though less was said about the soldier he was dragging. Missing an

arm and bleeding nonstop, the only thing he could utter to his healthy comrade was “Mama” before his eyes rolled back. Noah sniffed at his face and persistently licked as if trying to revive him, but it was for naught. His human companion had to tell him, “It’s not your fault. Our brother is no longer alive, but you did all you could.” He then pointed towards the water and instructed, “Go recover other soldiers and hopefully, by Almighty’s grace, they’ll make it.”

Noah proceeded to go through multiple laps up and down, dragging troops to the shore; some of them were penetrated by bullets just after thanking him, while others were paralyzed down to the hip and had to be supported by their comrades. By the end, a German Shepherd who once spent half his life serving the Axis rescued twenty American lives, and fifteen lived, thanks to medics performing surgery and resuscitating their water-logged lungs, to tell the tale. What stopped him from continuing such a feat was Shirley’s commanding officer ordered him to stop stalling and advance past the initial fortifications. There was also Shirley’s tolerance of looking back and seeing a multitude of drowned bodies running thin as well as his concern that Noah would inevitably die there. Thus, the dog was ordered back and

assigned a new job: destroy land mines concealed in the sand.

Under the pressure of machine-gun fire, Noah uncovered up to thirteen mines, allowing explosive disposal experts to diffuse one obstacle for advancing troops. However, he was whimpering more and more frequently and, upon returning to Shirley, displayed hearing problems.

“Thanks, boy,” his master complimented. “Now, go target the machine guns way up there.”

Noah only stood still, panting nervously and whining.

His human friend realized that the explosions and the constant flying of bullets rendered his furry friend half-deaf and instead pointed to the turret-mounted fortresses. That mission would’ve been instant suicide for any other dog, but German breeds attracted no suspicion from the Wehrmacht. Instantly, Noah ran across the Atlantic Wall, barking and creating clatter yet avoiding all artillery fire. Every time he ambushed a startled and confused machine gunner by grasping his jaws on German leather, an American sniper was given an opportunity to hit the target and remove the dirtiest weapon of the enemy’s arsenal. Shirley could hear his comrades

cheering and congratulating upon noticing the disabled turrets and was tempted to join in only to silently advance instead.

With his actions, Noah saved thousands of lives. However, he met his end when, with a growl emanating from his throat, his lunge at a German sniper on one of the last defended fortresses caused the enemy to jab a knife into his stomach in a terrified state. In an instant, Noah yelped in pain, alerting Shirley and his comrades to his location. With a look of deep concern and firearms steady to the side, he raced to the dreaded fortress, worried that the worst had occurred.

Upon discovery, Mottentosh, his uniform stained by the blood of his fallen comrades and the sand of imploding shoreline, noticed his friend's wounded body and the sniper carrying a bloody knife. Despite hollering, "I am sorry! Please do not shoot me! It was an accident!" with a look of guilt on his face, the surrendering German was beaten and thrashed by the mighty fists of a furious Jew until he was nothing but a bloody pulp. Shirley then turned his attention over to Noah, his eyes losing their flame. At first, he poured water from his canteen to cool down the oozing fluids leaking from the dog's belly. When that was not enough, Shirley ordered a medic to stitch his wound. While that

happened, Shirley tried to calm Noah down as his breathing became slower and his whimpers became fainter. Unfortunately, neither of those measures was effective. The light slowly left the dog's eyes, all his body parts stiffened, and the beats of his heart silenced. Noah was utterly bereft of life, and the only thing his owner could do was pick him up by the arms and let his cheeks flow with tears. Lt. Col. Dee churlishly intervened, tarnishing the moment.

"Whimper for the lives of your fellow Americans, not a Kraut, and certainly not a Kraut animal."

Shirley crudely answered back, "Noah was more of a hero than you or Eisenhower or Bradley ever were! He saved lives! What did you do?"

With revulsion painted on his face, Dee was about to reprimand him for his insubordinate behavior until Mottentosh's comrades stood next to him and defended his actions.

"I hate to say it, but that Kraut saved my life," DaBloise declared. "He deserves about as much respect as any other war dog."

As a response to all those defenses, their commanding officer gave up on the

scolding yet insisted that his subordinates leave Noah's body at rest.

"We're in a war, men. We don't have time to bury every corpse. Our mission is to march through France until the stink of Kraut filth is gone."

However, Shirley suggested that the team carry him on a transport until they found a proper place to bury him. Noah's body, he thought, should not be mistaken for an enemy dog when his Allied brethren return to the beaches and recover the fallen. Despite some reluctance by Dee and others, they eventually agreed on the decision.

Thus, for the next few months, the 72nd Infantry Battalion traveled from the coastlines to the countryside with Noah's bagged body riding from the back of a truck. There were complaints of filth, the stench of blood, and the presence of flies surrounding the corpse, but they eventually found a place to haul the body: Alsace. It was situated between the border of liberated French and hostile German territory. Shirley felt like Noah belonged between two worlds: his German heritage and his free Allied character. Besides, he told his comrades, his father claimed that German Shepherds were once called Alsatians during his day. Digging a hole in neutral soil and

gently dropping the body bag into it like a coffin, Shirley regaled how important Noah was to him.

“It may be surprising that we honor this dog, a German once in the hand of Germans for possibly an entire year, but he’s earned the right to be consecrated in holy ground. Noah saved the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands, not just on the cramped streets and crooked hills of Italy but on the gory sands of Normandy. However, Noah wasn’t just any other war dog,” Shirley proudly claimed, wiping a tear from his eye with an arm. “He was my friend. In my time of need, Noah was there for me. When I felt depressed and wanted a drink to drown my sorrows, he nuzzled against me and convinced me life was worth living. Noah was the bravest dog I’ve ever met. It will be hard for me to recover from this ordeal, but I’ll have to do it for his sake, if not for all our sakes.”

Afterward, the hole was filled with unstained dirt, and a simple large stone was placed on the surface. It was crudely etched with the label “Noah War Hero XX XX XXXX-06-06-1944” since the dog’s date of birth was not yet known.

For decades, Noah remained remembered only by veterans of the

Normandy landings. Even when the war ended, even when seasons changed, even when the land surrounding the grave ebbed from summer grass to winter snow, Noah's heroism didn't expand. It took more than forty years of lobbying by Shirley and other American survivors of D-Day before the U.S. government recognized the dog's existence, and his body could be relocated overseas in much better conditions. On February 12, 1986, Noah was entombed in Aspin Hill Memorial Park, this time with funeral music playing and his date of birth recognized thanks to research into his origins. The reburial service was attended by hundreds, including the veterans' families.

Flashing forward, Shirley is still kneeling at the grave of his friend while some of his comrades wander off. One of them, Col. Robert Davies, notices a peculiar grave nearby and remarks, "Hey Shirley, did you know we used to have a mascot?"

"What?" Shirley replied, confused by what the question meant.

"Look here, there's a grave featuring some mutt named Rags. He apparently served in our division during the First World War."

Shirley gets up on his feet and walks towards the location, discovering the truth. On

the headstone, it read, “Rags War Hero 1st Division Mascot WWI 1916-1936”.

Looking up at the cloudless blue sky, he proudly declares. “Huh? So, you’re with the greats now, Noah. You and Rags. Both heroes who fought with our team, albeit in different wars.” Then he turns towards a melancholic tone, lowering his head to the ground. “If only you lived longer to experience a life of peace.”

When his eyes leak once more, Shirley’s friends console him, each claiming that within twenty years, they would be meeting Noah in Heaven anyway.

“Besides,” Donelly stated matter-of-factly. “If you stall any longer, we’re going to miss the Golden Jubilee celebration down in Washington. Don’t you want to watch as millions remember what we sacrificed at Normandy? Your family’s probably going to be watching too.”

Shirley lightly jabs him in the elbow for that tongue-in-cheek comment but agrees to move on from the cemetery. One last look back, and he notices the illusion of Noah standing right beside his grave with glimmering eyes, a toothy rictus full of glee, and a tail flapping with spirit. Only a confident salute served as a satisfying reply. This brave

war dog may be dead in body, but he still lives inside the hearts of Normandy's survivors.

17 Dec. 2021

Eight Years since the Science Project

Eight years.

Eight years have passed since I worked on the Rock Cycle project.

The nightmares!

The trauma!

I'm still haunted by that memory to this very day.

In my third year at Coronado High School, my favorite teacher, who often wore a Hawaiian shirt and ponytail, assigned us a project over winter break: we had to demonstrate the transition of rocks from one state to another in our own ways; it felt like heaven. I would finally exert my creative juices before 2013 went home to roost. Instead, the project was a month of hell, a month filled with nothing but exhaustion, indigestion, and self-loathing.

What were the tools?

Seven flag-sized folds of craft paper, a pair of scissors, a couple of Sharpies, a stick of glue, and a whole family of colored pencils. Every day, from 6 A.M. to 10 P.M., I would crawl on my knees, whether on wooden tiles or carpet rug, and cut shapes into the paper, scribble images into the fabric, darken the outlines, envelope the pictures with hues,

fasten paper together, and even label every corner with geological lingo.

And for what?

I wasn't bringing a diorama to life. I wasn't delivering the audience a picture book or a PowerPoint presentation or a handwritten or typed story. I wasn't creating the usual content as other students. No, imagination was in my blood, and I planned to prove myself an amateur video game designer by illustrating levels.

Oh yes, levels: 2D side-scrolling action, platforms, enemies, collectibles, and most importantly, story and characters. All thanks to my love of Mario and Mega Man.

The protagonist was a lantern-jawed, stone-skinned adventurer tasked with bringing down and absorbing three great heroes to defeat the dreaded forces of fiery hot volcanic destruction. And each hero had to represent a phase in the rock cycle, with their powers being integral to advancing the game.

Holy ambition, Batman!

My goals were multilayered:

· Write a story.

· Create characters.

· Visualize the level design.

· Imagine the box art.

· Manipulate the paper to my liking.

· Entertain and educate at the same time.

While other students aimed for 100%, I aimed for 200%. It didn't matter that I was losing appetite and often vomited over even the most meager portions. It didn't matter that my parents' smiles over my efforts soon turned to concerned frowns. It didn't matter that I missed the festive spirit of Christmas or the triumphant celebration of New Year's Eve. It didn't even matter that I became the staple of the slogan, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy", popularized by *The Shining*.

No, I wanted to push my sixteen-year-old body to its very limits, even if, every day, my mind cracked and fat shrank and shrank until I nearly resembled a starved Mexican boy. Throughout December of 2013 and into early

January 2014, I became so addicted to my ultimate homework assignment that an occasional withdrawal only cast a gloomy downpour over my emotions. I refused to allow myself leisure nor did I spend time with my year-long friend during our last months together. Once I was driven to theaters and forced to watch a movie in order to allow me a sense of joy.

But it was only fleeting.

Opinions on *The Desolation of Smaug* gave way to the exasperating cries of a thousand “I must continue this project! I must finish it!” Neither was the eight-day tradition of Hanukkah nor the passive observance of Christmas able to cool my stressed attitude. And when I sat down for breakfast or lunch or dinner, only one thing was on my mind. Not the taste, not the texture, not the appearance, not the passion for food.

No, it was the project. That damn project that couldn’t allow me to cool down like igneous rock.

I couldn't hold things down, nor could my portion size be as tight because Mister

Stress ran the wheels, and Miss Fun was in exile.

How many days did it take for me to finish?

Four weeks.

Four weeks to manipulate and scribble on seven sheets of arm-sized paper and rarely give myself any time to relax, even with a handheld device awaiting the owner to play with it.

Whether I was depicting a fossil-embedded canyon, a frozen lake, a fiery wasteland, or the inside of a volcano, my imagination was as hot as metamorphic rock at the expense of my health and happiness.

By the time my delicate fingers cast the finishing touches in a library corridor resembling a police interrogation room, my sanity had almost become like sediment: fractured and crumbly. My eyes felt tired, my throat was sore, and my arms and legs were virtually absent of mobility. My work speed was as gargantuan as that of an author or an artist conceiving their magnum opus.

What was I graded?

120%

A++.

I surpassed expectations in the teacher's eyes; I went above and beyond. The result of my work was a masterpiece, an article of genius to be displayed at his home like a museum artifact. I, on the other hand, reeked with shame and guilt.

For the next few months, every pound of fat I lost had to be regained, every little meal had to grow larger, and every territory of my body had to be liberated from Mister Stress one by one whether by playing a video game or watching YouTube videos.

To this day, when I type my stories, when I double-check them, when I send them over for peer review, when I often take their advice, and when I submit them to magazines awaiting their publishing, I look back on the haunting interregnum between the semesters of my junior year and tell myself, "Never again."

Never again would I waste my health and happiness pursuing one goal. Never again would I leave family worried and sacrificing their happiness to augment mine. Never again should I strive for perfection while ignoring the good. Never again will I forget to live in the moment because I’m distracted by future prospects. I have taken the words of Confucius and Voltaire to heart. I am a better person than I was in my youth, and the dreaded project that once waded around in my head no longer does.

28 Feb. 2022

Eulogy for a Departed Furry Friend

Jake died today.

At 10:45 A.M., on the 27th of February of 2022, my parents and I drove to the hospital in order to finally put him down. It took an hour of waiting, contemplation, and tears before the doctor arrived to take Jake away so that his suffering would cease. His mobility, eyesight, hearing, bowels, and dignity had all been stripped away from him over the last few weeks. For most of his life, Jake remained energetic and excitable, as though he had never aged in his life. I could only give him one last goodbye, a hug, and a tear-jerking speech about how much he meant to me before I had to run out to my mother's car and weep into a tissue for a few minutes. It was the first time I ever visibly cried since childhood.

Nothing in my life broke me so much as the death of my friend, the best friend any family could ever ask for. I may have been distraught by the fact that my paternal grandfather shifted from the mortal coil before my Bar Mitzvah, but he wasn't close to me. In fact, Zayde resided in another state, and my interactions with him were infrequent before he collapsed from a stroke and was pulled from life support by my maternal grandmother. Jake, on the other hand, lived

with us for almost fifteen years, and we had the choice about his quality of life.

At first, only my father wanted to euthanize him, stating, through broken tears, that he just couldn't stand to see Jake constantly slip on the floor over a sprained leg or excrete wastes inside the house. Eventually, though, my mother took his side. In contrast, I didn't want his life to be artificially stopped. I expected him to live out the rest of his days happy, dying in his sleep on a comfortable bed instead of on a medical table with chemicals injected into his skin and pills in his gullet. *Besides*, I said, *so what if he soils his bed upon death? That's a minor inconvenience, a mere embarrassment compared to terminating a wonderful family member whose ailments weren't torturous nor was his mind completely awash in confusion*. Alas, I was the minority vote and, since Jake couldn't speak for himself, my parents had to decide in his stead. Yes, my single greatest loss is a dog, a dog who possessed a strong bond with me for over half of my life. He was much more than a pet, though; Jake was a friend and a brother.

Through my elementary school years, I owned three pairs of goldfish, and, while my heart did crack with each one reaching its

expiration date, the fact that my relationship with them was limited to staring, feeding and provoking fear with the tap of a glass meant that my grief lasted about as briefly as their memory of me. Jake was different.

When we adopted him two months after his birth and brought him from his native California to neighboring Nevada, I knew he was going to be a special member of this family. His vibrant energy, cuddly appearance, child-like temperament, and youthful resolve always delighted me even when, in his early years, he expressed displeasure over my impulsive teasing and prodding.

Sure, even before age caught up to him, Jake spawned some problems for the family. When we vacationed in California and hired my maternal grandparents to act as babysitters, he ended up soiling every floor, stuffed toy, and piece of furniture out of boredom and naivete by the time we returned. And on another trip, that poor labradoodle emerged from daycare with bleeding ears, shivering legs, and a pained expression thanks to a confrontation with an aggressive “playmate”.

Nevertheless, Jake contributed to many more positive memories. Whenever I was

drowning in a sea of melancholy or a storm of boredom, he was always there to comfort me. When I needed a spark of inspiration, Jake was by my side as a source of creativity. And whenever I simply wanted a laugh, I could always look in the backyard where he performed the most amusing antics I've ever seen in a dog.

But now?

No longer can I scratch him behind the ears, under his chin, or on his belly, triggering warm purrs. No longer can I stroke his lamb-like back or fluffy tail as he walked by me or stood still. No longer can I droop my hand like a caught fish, resulting in delightful strokes of a tongue or the incessant sniffing of a nose. No longer can I roll up cheese or other treats and house medication inside them while he unsuspectedly scarfs them up. No longer can I amuse myself watching him bark at seemingly nothing from the backyard gate. No longer can I hear the sound of panting, barking, or whimpering or notice the sight of a wagging tail, smiling jaws, and the silvery gleam of his eyes. Most importantly, no longer can I delightful take spry and joyful walks around the neighborhood with him; Alone, they will be solemn, akin to Hamilton's grief-filled stroll after the accidental murder of his son. In fact,

my life will never have as much light as it did before Jake's death.

From every waking moment, I will remember him, from the living room and kitchen to the streets and even my father's bedroom. With how much light he brought to my life, my mourning will be long and painful, no better than when other relatives, such as my paternal grandmother and my uncle Michael, lost their dogs. And if anyone has the gallstones to claim that Jake is replaceable, that he could be easily substituted with another pet in a few years, I will verbally lash out.

The only thing left to do before I have to live with my grief is visit the crematorium so my beloved friend's ashes can be returned to the family. My parents made that decision due to costs, as well as the belief that holding a funeral urn would mean that Jake will never truly leave us. I, on the other hand, prefer burial. With an intact body laid to rest in a pet cemetery with a decorated gravestone, it's, to me, the more respectful option, even if it might be a hundred miles away. However, once again, my parents' choices dwarfed mine, and Jake's body will be put through the same fate as millions of other pets.

There are many who think post-death options don’t matter or state that pet owners should get over themselves since, to them, animals are just simple automatons meant to serve humanity. They would be wrong, however, to deny that Jake’s life had as much value as any other being, and no number of canine characteristics will contradict my intense emotions or humanity towards him.

When I see an empty sofa seat-shaped bed on the living room rug, I’ll remember how a dog once rested on it several hours a day like a kitten. When I see empty platters of silver, I’ll remember when a dog once nibbled and slurped on its contents. When I see a leg-sized gate sitting against a wall, I’ll remember how it was once used to keep a dog downstairs at the end of the night. When I see a collar and a leash beside each other on a wooden desk, I’ll remember how they were once attached to a dog who enjoyed the cool air and the smell of dew. When I see a brown tarp covering the couch, I’ll remember how it was once a literal welcome mat for a dog who wanted to spend time with his human master. When I see a black, opaque flap attached to a hole connecting the kitchen to the backyard, I’ll remember how a dog once used it as convenient transportation between the inside world of playtime and the outside world of

business. And when my parents leave for work every week, I will remember how I used to be not entirely alone.

If only I could reverse time and put last month on a loop just so I wouldn't have to deal with such a loving spirit exiting from my life. Alas, I know that's not possible, and some things are set in stone. Still, Jake was gone from the world too soon and too abruptly, and his end should have been far different.

Today was the worst day of my life, and the ugliness of the world will be even uglier without a precious cream-colored ball of fluff living in it.

2 May 2022

A Mediterranean Adventure

Baba ghanoush. Hummus. Labneh. Za'atar with olive oil.

On my twenty-fifth birthday, they were among the many dishes I dipped fragments of pita into.

Just yesterday, as preparation for a trip to the Holy Land, I had to explore a taste of the exotic culinary adventure I will fully experience in the four months to come.

The destination? Khoury's Mediterranean Restaurant, Las Vegas, NV, 9340 W Sahara Ave.

The time? 5:30 P.M.

Upon that day, my face was filled with disgust, and dread festered my mind. Out of all ethnic cuisines, Levantine is below everything else on the palatable food chain. Ever since

childhood, I've savored Italian meals rife with cheese, tomatoes, wheat, and herbs. I also appreciate how Mexican culture prides itself on infusing the mouthwatering tastes of queso and beef and chicken into the humble tortilla. And in terms of baked goods, Jewish delicatessens are king. Even eateries based on East Asian design accommodate the high standards of the pickiest diners via plain dribbles of white rice. But every food culture, from the green mountains of Lebanon down to the scorching deserts of Israel, specializes in spices and dips, veggies and seeds, seasonings and condiments. Nothing short of a platter of pita would ever be absent of garnish.

To say that Crazy Pita was a swell introduction would be tantamount to blasphemy, given the inbreeding of American and foreign dishes, the former dominant in its inauthenticity. Besides, my dinners there were no more than plastic containers of mildly seasoned flatbread and chicken shish kebabs.

Despite acknowledging my apprehension, my mother holds a firm belief passed down by her father: You'll never know what your taste buds will appreciate unless you broaden your horizons. Ever since high school, I've tried to follow her guidance, from grilled lean meats like chicken and salmon to

nutritious vegetables like spinach and sweet potatoes to even protein-rich brunch foods like scrambled eggs and tuna salad. However, Khoury's selection was the most daunting I've experienced, equal to charting dangerous caverns or sunken ruins.

For months, there were shivers across my gums and trembling at my joints, forcing me to ask myself, *“Will I like it? Would I hold my palate together? Is it possibly for me to not water down any nibbles with water?”*

When the time came, I wore nothing but a simple egg-white T-shirt, jet-black Velcro-fastened shoes, and blue and black basketball shorts, casual fashion clashing against the restaurant's formal aesthetic.

The exterior was simple and unassuming, with red and green lettering on the title while a black leafy symbol supplanted the apostrophe. Inside, however, was about as eye-catching as the menu. Sand-hued walls were complemented by brick columns with lamps stapled to them, while the seating was garbed in stainless white tablecloth. To top it all off, one flatscreen TV hung from one wall while various paintings and photos depicting the Middle East, past and present, hung from others. It was like I was in Lebanon itself. The immersive aesthetic would've overwhelmed

me if not for what I anticipated would get served.

But before I could savor the main course - roasted slices of chicken rolled up in a hard flatbread wrap - I had to test my tongue against various platters that gathered on the table like servings for a party of twelve.

Despite the awe-inspiring harmony of Middle Eastern instruments airing through the sound speakers and the aesthetic beauty surrounding my vision, what was supposed to be a life-changing adventure ended on a note akin to being pestered by fly-swarming dung wafting through an advertised tourist attraction.

First was za'atar floating in a pool of olive oil. As I imagined algae drenched in squid ink, I was wary of letting such a spice wriggle around my tongue, and with just one nip, I responded to my regretful choice with hasty sips of iced water.

Next was hummus and baba ghanoush, one an earth-hued mash of chickpeas and sesame seeds, the other a greyish stew of roasted eggplant and lemon juice. With paprika flakes sprinkled like toppings to an ice cream sundae, I could already feel an ominous warning whispering, "Turn back." Still, I

carefully enveloped the tips of pita fragments around the edges, expecting nothing stronger than tuna. From mere nibbles, I tasted not the surprising zest of satisfaction but the bitter flavor of disappointment, a flavor that could only be destroyed with more splashes of fresh water.

Then, I savored the deceptive mirage known as labneh. In front of my eyes was a white pudding simply garnished with herbs, hardly a contrast to the Australian dairy treats I indulge in every morning. But with one lap of my tongue, the oasis melted away to reveal a dip related more to sour cream than yogurt.

I couldn't take any more dips; thus, the solid appetizers - dolma and falafel – were targeted next. The former looked grotesque with its greasy jungle-green skin rolled up like sushi, even though they were plucked from juicy grapes before even arriving at the establishment. However, I didn't expect the bite to be worse than its bark, that I would be overcome by the sense of nauseating funk. As for the latter, despite appearing like a fried matzo ball, it puckered my lips faster than any platter in the story of my life. However, no matter how much I wanted to, I refused to let demons rule my thoughts and urge me to

make my opinions known through badmouthing in words or vomit.

The last hopes were the white cheeses in front of my father's chair. In defiance of Mom's warnings, I nibbled on the crumbly curds and realized, with fireworks dancing in my stomach, curdled milk from the udders of nannies and ewes is no less remarkable than that of cows. Ironically, they were the only meals not of Levantine origin.

Minutes later, the chicken wrap was delivered, freshly hot from the oven, coiled in foil, and smelling as if from a barbeque cookout. Just by sniffing at the addictive aroma, I couldn't wait to indulge in the food, even if it meant drenching my fingers in grease and letting them be repeatedly stung by the intense heat. My mood was turned one hundred eighty degrees after the first bite, and, with every chomp, the buds on my tongue danced. I didn't even mind shreds of meat spilling from the other hand like sand pushed down an hourglass since I was carried away by the juice dribbling down my chin.

If that wasn't enough, shortly afterwards, the course was complimented by julienne fries coated in black pepper, an American side dish with Middle Eastern zest. Just like with the chicken wrap, my appetite

sprang into high gear like a blood-frenzy shark and most of the platter was devoured within moments.

By the end of my culinary adventure, my belly was full and my heart was content, yet my mother was the opposite. I noticed her lower her salon-combed head in disappointment as though I vomited on the tablecloth or left the refrigerator running. For the past several years, she was devoted to getting me to not just traverse new nutritional boundaries but be transformed by them; for once, I came short of that goal. From now on, my culinary pitstops through the land of my ancient ancestors would be far more limited, and I will retreat to my comfort zone.

Nevertheless, yesterday was by no means fruitless. While my failure to annex Levantine cuisine to my library of staples will continue to me up inside, I braved through unexplored dishes when, years before, I would've turned my head away with merely a whiff. Perhaps Indian dining will be next on my list in the coming months. Perhaps I will seek soul food beyond fried chicken or battered biscuits. Most importantly, perhaps the inevitable confrontation between me and Israeli cuisine will not be as alienating as my

parents fear it might. There are still many more adventures to come.

2 Dec. 2022

O*vercoming Over Fifteen Years of Trauma*

It was June 2, 2007, on the night of my mother's forty-fourth birthday, when I experienced the most traumatic injury in my life, all thanks to a cruel mixture of deception and naivete: an inch-wide cut below my right eye.

The cause? A vicious animal snapping off a piece of skin, leaving me running with tears pouring down one eye and blood gushing down the other.

I don't remember what exactly it looked like nor what time the attack occurred; I don't

even remember how long the physical pain lasted. Only two details remain in my mind like amber-frozen fossils: that I was outside the site of Mom’s birthday dinner and that my mutilation was swift and unprovoked, with the mongrel’s face morphing from friendly to savage in the blink of an eye.

Fifteen years and six months have passed, and it’s taken long to recover. The creature's owner made me believe – with such honeyed words – it was as harmless as a fly, and I - being ten years old - fell for it. I crouched my body down and placed my limp hand under its snout, blind to the impending danger. I didn’t understand the reputation of those breeds since I never even heard of them at the time, but the incident impressed a grim reminder upon my face. Worse, the owner didn’t even mutter a single syllable in response: no apology, no scolding, nothing, nada, zilch. It was as if she lacked remorse for the pain of others.

As I was immediately driven back home, my pain transformed into trauma, and my trauma transformed into phobia. At first, I only experienced nightmares, but soon I regarded every dog of that attacker's breed to be just as frightening.

While my physical injuries have melted away into a nearly invisible spot, my mental scars still loom. Every time I look in the mirror, I inspect the damage the monster left on me, flashing back to the day I wept as a trail of blood trickled down my face. I don't silently weep or display a face of horror, but I'm frozen in my PTSD.

To this day, I dread any animal resembling the perpetrator, whether they be Staffordshire or pit bull. In open areas, like outdoor malls and the suburbs, I tread in the opposite direction when one begins to pass my way, but, when invited to someone else's house, like my cousin Bree's, I run from the door or jump onto furniture as soon as one approaches me. I knew the dogs themselves weren't at fault for the aggressive tendencies of sadistic men who invented the breeds to fight or kill, but my fear was too rock solid to separate individuals from the group. It became an involuntary response, akin to a jolt of pain from touching a hot light bulb.

Recently, however, I've been trying to stand up to such an irrational phobia, slowly exposing myself to the presence of pit bulls and growing comfortable with their existence. There wasn't one incident that changed my

view but a sudden realization that I shouldn't let irrational fear reign in my mind.

Now, whenever my neighbor, who lives parallel to my house, walks their beast in my direction, I don't shirk, I don't wince, I don't turn my head. My thought process is now, *"Don't judge the dog by its breed but by its individual behavior."*

Someday, I might even go up and pet it, even rub between its ears if the owner permits me to. When the fifteenth anniversary of my labradoodle Jake's adoption is coming up, I hope to be more tolerant towards any leashed animal that walks by, no matter the breed. There will be no more prejudice, no more paranoia, no more hate. Perhaps, someday, when I've moved on from my parents' home, made a living for myself, and overcome the last vestiges of grief for my beloved furry brother, I will adopt a puppy from that creature's kind. Redemption and forgiveness will be the victor.

4 Dec. 2022

A Night of Embarrassment and Fun

Whose Line is It Anyway?: A weekly tradition at the family household for the past four years. Ever since I discovered what more the CW had to offer besides superhero soap operas, I've been fascinated by that long-lived program.

Four contestants performing improvised - often dirty - skits for twenty minutes all while involving audience participation and a bouncy host? How could I say no to that?

It's the funniest piece of multi-man comedy I've seen since Monty Python. Wayne Brady is the show's Eric Idle, Colin Mochrie like Terry Gilliam, Ryan Styles is John Cleese's equal, and Greg Proops and Jeff Davis are the Terry Jones and Michael Palin of the group respectively.

Thus, when my parents announced an invitation to a live performance last month, it felt like a dream – one you'd want to wake up from, shrieking holy terror.

You see, while audience participation has always been one of the main elements of the series right from the start, it's never been charming for my viewing eyes. Whether that be “Sound Effects” (where they mimicked noises) or “Lip Sync” (where they mouthed to whatever the contestants said), I tended to be annoyed enough to press the fast forward button faster than Joey Chestnut gulping down a hot dog. Watching *Whose Line?* live for possibly over an hour would stamp down what would otherwise be leisurely for me and possibly drive me to contempt. Over the next few weeks, I shuddered at the appointed date, hoping a blizzard or sick day would disrupt such scheduling.

On the night of the live showing, my stomach churned in disgust. It wasn’t just from the pungent texture of black pepper-laden cheese pasta I had over dinner. I realized that the live show would take place at UNLV’s Performing Arts Center, the place where many an orchestra played.

Talk about déjà vu. The last time I was there was five years ago, and little had changed. The space was still grand, the occupancy was still lively, and the architecture was still awe-inspiring, yet none of those aspects masked the place’s utter shallowness.

I had to sit in the middle of the lounge area for an hour with nothing but a smartphone to keep me occupied. It didn't help that, during the hiatus, I overheard a heated conversation between a woman and her son over politics.

When the entrance to the auditorium finally opened up for us to sit on one of the farthest aisles, I noticed something peculiar. There was only one person at the piano stand, and he didn't resemble famed pianist Laura Hall or guitarist Linda Taylor. Neither did I see an emcee stand, which has often been occupied by long time show host Aisha Tyler. Things really took a weird turn when Greg Proops appeared on stage and announced that night's activities. Despite his snazzy silver suit and pompadoured hair, I didn't think he was show host material; yet, here he was talking about the rules of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, explaining the improv routines based on audience participation, and introducing the rest of the guests.

"Where were Wayne Brady and Colin Mochrie?", I wondered. *"They're regulars on this show. Who the hell cares about Bill Murray's younger brother?"*

Despite my disappointment over their unavailability, I was nevertheless eager over what came next.

The quality? Started out strong.

When Joel, Greg, and Jeff posed as Dan Akroyd, Ozzy Osbourne, and Christopher Walken respectively for a parody *Jeopardy!* game, I began to chuckle. Their impressions were so G-ddamn stellar to the point where the SNL versions would be crying their hearts out. When the guests did a sketch satirizing the correlation between hookers, casinos, and the homeless to the City of Sin, I laughed. As a resident of said city, I couldn't help but invisibly nod my head to the stereotypes. When Jeff and Greg performed a tongue-and-cheek duet about romance between two preschool teachers, I was almost in tears. Somehow, the way they spoke their lines as well as their body mannerisms raised their sheen of comedy from gold to platinum. And when they turned a woman's story about her ex-husband's death into a mocking ditty, I almost asphyxiated as though breathing in Joker venom. It may've been crossing the line but damn if doing it twice didn't double the laughter. Little did I know shenanigans started to go sideways towards in the end.

As soon as audience members were called up for “Sound Effects”, I requested my mother hand me irregularly-shaped wax earplugs to muffle the sound, with results about as effective as shielding yourself from a hailstorm via umbrella. The quality got worse in the last thirty minutes when hoedowns and duets were to be sung. What should’ve been fun little ditties featuring impressions of famous musicians or Old West-style melodies instead devolved into incoherent blubbering and mind-numbing beats. It was so astonishing that those routines would fall faster than a bowling ball dropped from a one-story window, especially when they are typically some of my favorite parts of the show. Never would I even imagine momentarily shutting off my eyelids during a comedy sketch until that point. My mother suggested the members were experiencing the effects of either alcohol or edibles. While the truth will never be revealed, I think her hypothesis is right. There were times on recorded episodes where cast members forgot their lines or stammered through songs, but they were never *this* embarrassing.

At the end of the performance, while leaving the auditorium to spend time relieving myself and washing my hands, I experienced a cacophony of emotions: fun and cringe. The

live show was bursting with so much energy, comedy, and entertainment that I remember why, week after week, I continue to watch *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* On the other hand, the crowds, the audience participation, the mindless rambling at the end, they all slowly and painfully punctured a little hole in my soul. Nevertheless, I don't regret this unique, memorable experience. It's like the dream of someone who wants to be part of the audience of S*aturday Night Live*. This show will always be a modern-day tongue-in-cheek legend for me, and I will miss it when *Whose Line is It Anyway?* makes its final bow next season.

14 Oct. 2023

A New Dog, A New Status Quo

It's been a few days since what would have been Jake's sixteenth birthday. For almost two years, he's existed only as a picture frame in the living room and a box of ashes atop the dining room fireplace. I still mourn him and all the missing time we would have had together, but now I have a new furry friend to fill the void in my heart, a friend who may live just as rich and long a life as expected.

Until a few months ago, adopting a new hairy member into the family was inconceivable in my eyes.

Nothing can replace Jake! No one can secure his spot! I would rather live alone than adopt another dog!

My mother was just as unsure, believing that reliving our steps to develop Jake from a pup to a grown-up would be taxing to all our mental states.

Imagine the potty training! Imagine the nipping and jumping! Imagine having to keep him busy day in and day out!

The only person who truly desired another canine companion was Dad, who possessed the most robust relationship with my late furry brother out of all of us. Perhaps it was the depression he developed since September of last year guiding his interest; maybe he just wanted another chance at recreating the feeling Jake had in our lives. The true reason didn't matter. His feelings overpowered ours, and this year would be time for a new pet to expand the household from three to four again.

It would take until August for us to understand the specifics of the upcoming gift. For me, adopting another Labradoodle was a no-go. It had to be another crossbreed: no cream coat, no ears the color of apricots, no texture that curled like a lamb. In short, nothing that would remind me of Jake.

At the same time, my biases still leaned towards another poodle mix, sharing the same low shedding coat and adorable face. Out of all available alternatives - Goldendoodles, Maltipoos, Poochons – the best of all worlds was the Bernedoodle; to my parents, inheriting its parent breed’s docile temperament balanced out the other parent’s excitable traits. Sure enough, my wish eventually came true in the form of a local breeding clinic maintaining Bernedoodle puppies.

The first question was which sex to adopt. By a two-to-one vote, males were preferable since they lacked issues included in the female anatomy, such as bloody discharge and heat cycles.

Next was how many. For the first time, Mom admitted that she wanted to adopt a pair so one brother could keep another company. But to paraphrase a proverb, one's company, two's a crowd. In my eyes, it was already troublesome enough to manage one dog, but another would not only create sibling rivalry but be too much of a hassle to handle.

Then, we had to pick out a name. I preferred a simple one like Logan or Cody, but Mom, after going through a long list of Hebrew names (We are Jewish), was inspired

by one of her favorite cinematic characters: **Atticus.**

My thoughts? What a pretentious name. It's the equivalent of calling your pet parrot Caesar.

Alas, I had to relent to my mother's decision since I already picked out the name for our first dog, and every time I hear or mention his name, I silently gritted my teeth.

A month later, we visited the place, a mess of miniature playground equipment, toys, and plastic chairs; unlike Jake’s former home, it was outdoors, other families participated, and only the puppies themselves were visible, no mother or father in sight. There were eight in total: two being tan and white, two being black and white, and the other half being a blend of the three hues. In less than an hour, we knew which one was the right pup for us: the shy remainder nicknamed "Yellow Boy". With his elongated face, silky fur, and mottled tan and white coloring, he barely looked like Jake. He also stayed behind and acted still and calm while his siblings made a ruckus the visitors with their biting and jumping.

When he sat on my lap, I could feel something special within him even as he acted

afraid of slipping off. Once, I thought someone like him would be a nuisance, a distraction from my lasting woes. But he was something more, like a living embodiment of therapeutic treatment for my lonely soul. My tension soon melted away into satisfaction, and I left the play area hoping for further satisfaction.

However, it would take a couple more weeks before we could take him as our own, and, during that time, we went shopping for various equipment. At one local pet store was a cornucopia of toys: balls, plastic rings, tug rope, plush animals, you name it. At another, we lugged a carrier small enough to secure his entire body along with a crate and some beds.

Less than three weeks ago, this new puppy came to our house as a delivery from the breeder, as if he was a newly delivered human infant. She insured that most of the toilet training issues had been resolved. That proved to be a bare-faced lie.

Problems immediately started blooming like a freshly watered garden. Atticus' calm and shy demeanor at the breeding facility immediately devolved into animalistic excitement, biting at feet, pawing at legs, and gripping his maws on any leathery substance he could find. Our schedules also had to be

reworked so, every two hours, one of us would walk him to the backyard to assist in his potty training. And after every night, I was tasked with locking him in the crate and cloaking it with a blanket, only to hear incessant barking early in the morning.

My mental state has been on the edge since the dawn of October. Nevertheless, I'm glad to have adopted him. I can bear the accidents, the teething, and the constant attention like the first time; the early years with Jake wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows. But I know it’s a phase he will eventually emerge from.

Perhaps the next few years of my life will involve getting to live with new changes and new challenges. Perhaps they won’t. History will tell.

1 Jan. 2024

A New Home Awaits

The old year has crumbled to dust and cinders, and a new one arrives without fanfare; this fact of life has been the state of the world since forever. However, what's different about the current year is that my body is wracked with anxiety, and my mind is haunted by frustration. Witnessing the publishing process of various Word documents I've typed out is a familiar challenge, but what will happen mere months from now is harrowing enough to upturn my life like an out-of-control carousel. By the end of the presidential primary elections, I'll be leaving behind not just the house I've resided in but the entire neighborhood that had been like a constant life-sized landscape in my eyes since the dawn of the new millennium.

It was a decision driven by my practical-minded parents and motivated by a fusion of

rising costs at our gated community and a desire to be as close to the rest of my family as possible.

With every minute, my breath shudders, my heart races and my mind rattles at the thought of moving to my maternal grandparents' place several miles from here. Spending days living with them is far from an exotic experience for me. Whether it be while my house was being renovated or while my parents were venturing on out-of-state trips, I've grown familiar with the one-story building featuring a computer desk sandwiched between bookshelves, a child-sized bedroom decked with exercise equipment, and a marble kitchen just parallel to the living room. The memories of partaking in holiday feasts, listening to the filtered audio of game shows across the hall, and pushing my body with weights and an electric treadmill leave streaks of joy on my conscience.

It's not like the relationship between me and the current residents has withered into animosity and contempt, either. I still appreciate my maternal grandmother's tenderhearted, albeit overindulgent, attitude and her husband's diligent observance over festivities. Every time I would visit their house, I'm welcomed with warmth and compassion by

the two oldest living members of my family who often bake cookies and invite me into civil political debates.

The real demon taunting my emotional center comes from relocating to a guest house, separated solely by a garden doubling as a yard.

Only once did I spend a day there, a place that typically operated as a workstation for the tax accountants of the neighborhood. As someone desperate for an ounce of peace and quiet, my stay was a nucleus of boredom with an Internet-deprived computer, a claustrophobic bathroom, and the irritating moans of the air conditioner echoing throughout the rooms. It was as if I was living in the middle of a padded room right next to the nuthouse.

No bed. No dining space. No newspapers or books to derive pleasure.

When was this memory, you ask? Almost a year ago, months before my twenty-sixth birthday.

Flash forward to now: To my mother's chagrin, I've been reluctant to accept the possibility of returning there for over a month,

my feelings amplified by her matter-of-fact attitude and even more potent than during the debacle about whether or not to adopt another furry member of the family to replace the one I grieved for.

On one hand, a shrill inner voice screamed into nothingness:

What about all my journals?! My drawings?! My food?! My books?!

All of them would have to be tediously relocated across several miles into a cramped building where I would be isolated from the rest of my family.

Who would want that? Who would want to dump their possessions into bags and abandon their routine comforts for an alien dwelling? Who would want to do the work of reopening containers and filling rooms with personal possessions?

However, as my mother pointed out, I would finally gain that speck of independence I've been craving since the end of college, a wish I've even based poems on.

Sure, my parents are still the masters of my finances, and any transportation I require

will remain operated by others, but think about this:

My own house! My own kitchen! My own bathroom! A whole place to myself!

It would be like living in an apartment, albeit with neither a landlord to pay rent to nor connected rooms where I could hear the obnoxious rackets of loudmouthed neighbors.

One day, I might even earn enough moolah from my book sales to purchase a much larger house, one where the space where I lounge and the floor where I prepare my own meals are in different rooms, and the yard isn't divided between other residents and me.

When the time comes for me to restart my life in a new neighborhood and dwelling, I will look back at my old abode - hollowed of everything but lamps and bathroom supplies - with eyes not damp with tears but regretful, nonetheless.

I will miss the carpet-padded stairs where I could stretch my legs like a gymnast preparing for the Olympics.

I will miss my mother's bedroom, where I would hang out and watch game shows and historical dramas with her.

I will miss the backyard where, every day, I practice training with my new dog on walks and potty patrol.

I will miss my old neighborhood, where I would explore every nook and cranny, from the leaf-strewn pathway leading to an alley of dog-occupied yards to the roundabout next to the public pool.

I will miss all the sights and smells, the traditional routines that have dominated my life for years, even though I know I have to move on from them to enter a new chapter in my life.

Think of the house like a parent you have to leave behind in order to find a partner who’ll encourage independence.

Say goodbye to Thunder Mountain. Say hello to the House of New Beginnings.

8 Oct. 2024

My New Home: Here and Now

It’s been a few months since that fateful day when my parents and I moved out of our beloved home and into what belonged to my maternal grandparents. What was initially a once-in-a-season attraction I visited whenever Mom and Dad were busy at work or when their house was under repairs is now where I eat, where I shower, where I write, where I sleep, where I exercise, and even where I watch television.

Has residing in this new foundation lived up to my expectations?

After the trauma of waking up early in the morning to watch a gaggle of handymen loudly step through the door with their box of tools, remove everything, from the Lego sets I put together to the drawings I brought to life, and stack them on countless cardboard boxes, has this new life offset the costs? Was it worth witnessing the place where I’ve lived for almost twenty-five years gradually deteriorate

into a barren skeleton, only its infrastructure and plumbing remaining?

Two times I returned to the location to confiscate the last remaining possessions, I imagined hearing the drills, the hammers, the thumping of boots as though there was more deconstruction to be done; I can still smell the sawdust even when I think about my old home.

As for the new one? Well, the guest house where I dreamed of living in by myself is not yet finished, especially after a severe breach in security by a burglar; thus, I'm restrained to my familiar surroundings: the bedroom with barbells cornering each side of the mattress, the library sandwiched between shelves of photos and Lego sets, the kitchen where an elephant-gray island and a charcoal black table stand adjacent to the fridge and microwave, the living room where couches are positioned symmetrically behind a large-screen plasma TV.

Sure, there's a heap of readjustments to the original architecture; the dining room - once occupied by a piano, a marble sculpture, and a chessboard - is now hub to the family pet's crate, a pen substituting the kitchen gate as the area of his confinement. The door diagonally behind the office bathroom has been repurposed from a guest room to my father's personal turf. Even the kitchen used

to be home to an overhead TV screen playing the news. However, what little has been tampered, retouched, or displaced doesn't make up for the scent of déjà vu I've smelled wafting through the air for years.

My maternal grandmother used to offer me succulent chocolate chip cookies every time I sat on a wooden chair with a white mattress. In my youth, I used the library to play computer games. I remember the Jewish sculptures decoring the dining room.

The only completely new experience I've felt since the first of June is exploring the backyard. At the old house, it was concealed behind a simple curtained door and constrained to a square of brick walls, red pebbles and miniature hanging roof. The new yard, on the other hand, is as wide and expansive as a garden, with several square feet dotted with trees, bushes, and sculptures while interlocked with two guest houses - one to eventually reside in when I transition to independent living and another to store Lego sets and other fragile items unable to provide space in the main building. There is even a shed that serves two roles: storing boxes and trash barrels on its front and allowing our dog to perform his business in the back without anyone accidentally stumbling onto feces.

Nevertheless, no matter how much living space and room has been added to our new house, it came with drawbacks: With a lack of stairs and every room being confined to one floor, the view is neutered. No more can I peer out a window and observe the surrounding suburbs, whether to check on neighbors or noise polluting leaf blowers and lawnmowers.

Too much scope has its own drawbacks too; for years, I've explored every block within the gated community, either to walk my dog, dispose of litter, or jog my legs until they exhausted themselves. The linear layout, from sidewinding concrete trails to an asphalt cul-de-sac leading to a public pool, allowed for convenient footwork in thirty minutes tops.

But what can you do when the roads are wider than two cars parked parallel to each other and the neighborhood is organized like several rows of dominoes? How can you comprehend traveling even a fourth of the suburban area and finding yourself lost and unable to retrace your steps until an hour has passed?

And the mailbox – the very essential tool of any community for retrieving bills and magazines – could they've not placed it across

a road? Almost every day functions like a physically intense exercise to run out, retrieve mail, and bring it to the house.

And that’s not even mentioning the Monday-Wednesday-Friday hosing schedule, a dreadful spiritual successor to the time I was hired to water a neighbor’s backyard garden for a measly Benjamin.

Only difference? I’m now assigned to work at our front yard for free, with shrubs, bushes, and flowers extending from one side of the driveway to the other. It’s fortunate that the hose is more advanced than what I’ve known from more conventional designs, with a flexible, unbendable fabric allowing for more reach and no leakage.
In short, to ask whether the new location is a source of positive or negative emotion is the same as asking if the last college I attended was superior to the one I graduated from. There are an equal number of benefits and drawbacks to adopting the house of my grandparents and residing in an unfamiliar neighborhood where driving towards familiar locations varies in time.

I will eventually learn to accept living here as easy as breathing air. I have to.
30 Jan. 2025

My Life at Inclusion Fusion

Picture this: You've been living three-fifths of your life bouncing from one special needs group to the next, never finding the right one to squeeze into. First, it could be an enclave of preschoolers, each struggling with not only basic education but language skills. Then, it could be Touro University's Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities where you learn to socialize and communicate with others. Next, you could be serving at a local school's Best Buddies program to form platonic bonds with your neurodivergent peers. None of these opportunities quite work until you stumble upon Inclusion Fusion, a place that balances recreation with life skills.

That's been my experience since the early 2000s as a California-born, Nevada-raised Autistic American. Despite my high functioning mind and creative talents, my social skills were below average, often finding it difficult to speak to my peers in a clear and comprehensive way and huddling my inner self like a shy turtle. Every program I enrolled in - from kindergarten to high school - only proved to be temporary solutions that soon flickered out like candles.

By the spring of 2022, I completely shut myself off from connecting to anyone either unrelated to me or not part of my parents' generation, especially after my first dog passed away. However, graduating from two local colleges raised the chance to gain an independent living, and Mom and Dad discovered only one resource where I could learn to cook, clean, and handle money by myself.

Cue a brief meeting with Inclusion Fusion's co-director Mia Fortunato: Sitting across a conference room table on the building's second floor, I learned about the program's guidelines and filled out a form concerning biographical information. In their eyes, it wouldn't be another Touro but a life-changing experience that would set me down on the road to full autonomy.

First step: spending a day at a couple's rented mini-mansion with two dozen other participants.

Could you believe it? Before even exploring more of the program's headquarters beyond the waiting area and conference room, I had to dine, bathe, and sleep at some fancy house that teased me with a pool I could never dip my toes in.

Every day, I thought to myself, *What's the point? How would a sleepover benefit me? I'm not a freakin' kid anymore!*

However, on that day, I soon discovered its true value, as I not only learned to sweep the floors of any refuse and scrub every dish with lather but also purchase items at a nearby grocery store; it was like a test run to what an adult home owner has to do, albeit with the caveat of, thanks to my lack of a license, being a passenger instead of a driver.

So what if it came with slumbering on an uncomfortable inflatable bed, spending hours playing games in an ant-infested yard, or overhearing obnoxious banter from teens with mental disabilities? Trivial obstacles in my eyes.

By the time my parents arrived to pick me up and drive me somewhere special for dinner, I anticipated continuing to be a part of the Inclusion Fusion experience, only within the place itself.

A month passed and lo and behold, I returned to the program's main building for their first evening event, with attractions similar to what the recreation centers of my youth offered. One room contained a flat-

screen TV, a Wii console, and two movie posters stapled to the cubicle-like walls. In another, shelves upon shelves of board games greeted me; the most enticing of them was Cards Against Humanity, known worldwide as the gallows humor cousin of Apples to Apples.

And what about the lounge area, you ask? It was rife with entertainment, from an air hockey table and a movie projection screen to bopping modern music and servings of Little Caesar's pizza.

For three hours, I juggled one activity after another, thriving in the sense of pleasure I missed since my adolescent years.

However, the opportunities only truly surfaced when the administrators reminded us of the opportunity to partake in Tuesday cooking classes. For a week, I was as anxious as a flea-infested dog awaiting a veterinarian appointment. On one hand, I would learn how to not simply rely on microwaves to prepare my meals whenever my parents weren't around to toast sandwiches; on the other hand, being a junior chef sounded like a tedious goal, especially from the abundance of steps to transmute a bundle of ingredients into a beautiful work of edible art. Some required turning and flipping meat chunks over a

sizzling stove top while waiting for the time to drop by; others required shredding, slicing, and dicing vegetables and carefully measuring precise portions of certain ingredients. Not to mention, thanks to the cramped space, only half of the students could work in the kitchen at a time while the rest spent the interim on phone games.

By the end, thanks to the power of cooperation and high attention span, my first assignment was a cinch, and I earned the right to taste the first product of my labor.

Over the next year and a half, I drew myself more into Inclusion Fusion's programs, not just for cooking classes or recreation events but evening trivia where crowds were divided into teams and play rounds of questionnaires for two hours. And with every passing week, my connection to my special needs peers gradually increased. Sure, some are low-functioning handicaps who blurt random noises like hyperactive parrots, but most are affable and intelligent with their own charms and quirks. I even grew fond of some of the administrators, despite their tendency to treat attendees like children who needed to be guided around through icebreakers and instruction reading.

By March of last year, Inclusion Fusion evolved into a routine, typical element of my life that I take for granted as much as martial arts classes and trips to the grocery store. It helped that they installed more products of entertainment such as an Xbox console and coinless arcade cabinets that play beloved retro games from the ‘80s. The Nintendo Switch provided the most enjoyment out of those additions; thanks to its portability and accessibility, I could press my thumbs on any game during breaktime.

That’s why I was shocked by the announcement that Inclusion Fusion, and all its assets, would be relocated to an area near Ethel M’s Chocolates Factory with more space but no view. I got so used to the balcony where I could glance down at the parking lot, the flight of stairs that granted me an intense workout and the doorways painted with bright neon colors. The transition would be almost as distressful to me as my home relocation three months later, especially in the closing weeks when cooking classes looked barren.

However, despite the abrupt alterations and the false advertisement of the building’s proximity to a childhood attraction, I gradually became accustomed to the new surroundings.

Expanded space for both the waiting area and the lounge? Check.

More recreational opportunities including a foosball table and a Wii U console? Check.

An entire yard open for serving drinks, playing sports, and roasting marshmallows? Check.

Best of all, the cooking class's hub operated more like a professional work station than a home kitchen, no need for team divisions or assembling ingredients in the dining area. Every step, from chopping, cutting, and dicing food on a large wooden table to ridding discarded bowls and utensils, enabled me to understand how fulfilling being my own chef could be, to the point of even occasionally bringing instruction papers home.

You know what else Inclusion Fusion 2.0 brought to the table? A stable support base for my books.

For months, I struggled to publish my very first physical copy of Poet's Law – a poetry compilation - thanks to traditional networks' rejection of my PowerPoint-produced cover and the contents within. Only

the book editing skills of Mia Fortunato, the same co-director who invited me to participate in Inclusion Fusion in the first place, could finally help it arrive on shelves with a more appropriate cover and a reasonable price. And that only arrived shortly after my twenty-seventh birthday when she realized that I was making a career out of writing poems and stories, promising a thirty-minute-long scheduling ahead of cooking class on certain weeks she wasn't busy.
One of the most important events happened earlier this month when I participated in a Love on the Spectrum invitation.

For fifteen years, I was completely single and alone, losing my chance to form a true romantic relationship back in middle school. Thanks to a little goading, though, I managed to arrange a brief online meeting with one of the directors of the project, explaining my interests for the hope of a potential date with someone.

Overall, these nearly three years of being involved in the program contributed much to my well-being and purpose after college graduation. Did it come with challenges? Sure. Some cooking classes felt trivial with repeated courses of Mexican cuisine or plain out sweet treats. In many

cases, the administrators refused to coordinate any post-meal activities other than clean up. And rare occasions called for unbearably long lines or ear deafening music or even plain unpleasant fellow attendees with worse social skills than me.

However, at the end of the day, Inclusion Fusion has been more of a boon to me than a burden. I won't forget the number of times a sour day was uplifted by a night of playtime or food prep, neither will I misremember the moments where my state of ennui was disrupted by two hours of prepping naturally made meals. Every week offered something different, something refreshing, something that strengthened my emotional journey.

A Fictional Race-Conscious Letter

March 5, 1966

Dear Barry Skyler,

So you know the truth: I'm not a racist punk who scolds strangers for having the color of a chocolate bar. I'm an open-minded white man who actively supports the Civil Rights movement, who supports integration, who supports Martin Luther King. I've been like this since before we became friends, sorry to say, but I've hid those feelings.

As a Jewish kid growing up in Baltimore, I was raised by my parents to be conscious on how the Gentiles looked at me, to assimilate with them and explain how it was better to be white and Jewish than black and Christian. If we had Black neighbors, they would only be on the other side of the street, never to be gazed at. And our synagogue often omitted the mixture of races.

Do you realize how wrong that sounds, to go against the values of my faith for the sake of appeasing white Gentiles?

What you don't know is that, despite my parents and community's attempts to indoctrinate me with racist values, I never truly bowed to them. Often, when my parents were away shopping or in their beds, I snuck out of the house and played with a Black girl named Alexandra, sometimes even sharing romantic feelings. They never knew about it, my community never knew about it, not even her parents knew about it. Her father almost caught me, though, and swatted me away with a shotgun, thinking I was a filthy badger. Our friendship lasted a couple years until the Klan burned a cross on their lawn and forced them to leave.

That’s when I met your fourteen years ago. I still consider you a good friend after all these years and I went along with your blackface routine and demeaning jokes and your drunk behavior, but it was all a façade. Under the ignorance and pride, I loathed every expression of racism that spewed from your face and fingers and hoped you would change your mind sooner or later. I wish, by this point, you do, since I’ll now be spending years in prison, mocked for my affinity with Black people and betraying “my own heritage” and scorned by my community forever.

What bullcrap.

I don’t prefer one color over another; I think of them equally. There’s no such thing as betrayal of heritage, unless you’re marching to the tune of white supremacy, the very same tune the Nazis marched to when they killed your cousins back in Europe.

I was an activist for as long as I knew about people like Alexandra, but I only openly took on that role after the March on Washington. Before then, I was too frightened by the prospects of massive reprisal, possibly lynching, yet I decided to expose my sympathies to an oppressed minority. All I did was fervently read the newspaper and watch

television and studied to be a social science teacher. But the inspiring speed about love and equality and perseverance, it compelled me to leave that job behind and risk my reputation on a movement that had a surefire risk of failing.

I was only one of several dozen white people to participate in sit-ins, picket lines, bus pull ups, resulting in me being heckled and beaten and almost burned by a thrown matchstick or two. And don't you think that all of the Black activists were getting touchy-feely with me; I did suffer some discrimination at the hands of suspicious members distrustful of my fair skin and religion. One muttered that I was a Christ killer and another assumed I only pretended to care about the movement in order to weaken it from within. Hell, another personally knew of our activities in college yet still misinterpreted me as a racist. But even then, I knew it was a minority that responded with such understandable hostility.

Alexandra vouched for me to be accepted since she knew how I treated her as children. Her father was murdered by the Klan years ago, which provoked her to start fighting in a peaceful manner anyway.

And thus, I spent three years narrowly avoiding arrest and participating in Selma and Montgomery before ending up arrested for allegedly being involved near the scene of a riot. I'm sorry I never told you about my true colors for a long time; I wouldn't imagine what your reaction would've been.

Would you have accepted me or decided that friendship would not last?

I know our politics wildly differ: You support the GOP while I endorse the Democrats. You voted for Nixon and Goldwater; I voted for JFK and LBJ. But despite those differences, I hope we can share colorblindness together just like all good people should. Please don't be brainwashed by your own upbringing; you're your own person, not a toy to be played with by your close-minded family. There's no hope in reforming mine; they've cut my stipends and shunned any future visit. Hell, my photos are probably being omitted out of shame. You're the only white friend I grew up with who can possibly understand my point of view. I don't know when I'll be out of this sinkhole.

Five years? Ten years? Fifty?

Whatever the case, I hope you're a new, more tolerant man than when I first met you.

Most importantly, I hope you can continue what I've been fighting for all those years to make King's dream come to life even when he dies. If that means your family shuns you, then so be it.

And who knows?

When I'm released on bail, we might go back to the harmless, inoffensive things we used to do, playing Scrabble, imitating famous comedians, eating bagels with lox. Times are a-changing, Barry, and you can't be angry at me like this forever. Even if I'm planning to elope a girl like Alexandra, you'll find some way to leave your anger and forgive me. The guards only allow me to write a letter once a week. I'll find the time to do other things like converse with my inmates or sketch pictures on the walls or pray to the Almighty for all I care. Let freedom ring.

Sincerely,

Your friend Raymond Boyd